The Conspiracy of Ice and Fire

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Summary

What if the three members of the Kingsguard who stayed at the Tower of Joy knew of Ned Stark's search for his sister. What if they were able to meet him in secret and concoct a plan to keep the new-born King safe until he could reclaim his rightful throne.

While Jon (Aegon Targaryen) grows up, a small group secretly prepares Westeros for the restoration of the Targaryen dynasty.

Notes

Other relationship tags will be added later.

This is my first story in this fandom so I will start of by stating the obvious: I do not own any of the characters, nor did I invent any part of GRRM's beautiful world. I'm just simply bold
enough to loan them for a time.

Any anachronisms or geographical inconsistencies will be explained as artistic license :-) This work is unbeta'd, so all mistakes are mine. I'll try to keep them to a minimum ...
Prologue

The road ahead looked as desolate as the previous days. Dry warm winds and a relentless sun in a cloudless sky didn’t help matters. Ned loosened his tunic some more and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He’d never been so far south. ‘Starks don’t thrive in the South’, he thought again. He had forsworn his grey/white armor and leather attire several weeks ago and wore only a white linen tunic which was soaked through at the waist where his sword belt kept the material in place.

Looking around he saw nothing but sand, stones and dry bushes. How he longed for the northern forests with large green trees or even better, a small brook or a stream. He sighed and made an effort to right himself on his horse.

When he looked behind him, his loyal entourage was not faring any better. At first glance, the small group he’d handpicked to accompany him on this quest looked like a ragtag band of misfits. Only if you looked closer and were familiar with the northern sigils you would know that he was accompanied by three lords of the North.

First up were Lord Umber or “the Greatjon” the large man proudly displaying the umber sigil of a roaring giant and Lord Howland Reed recognizable by his sigil of a black lizard-lion on grey-green. They rode side by side and were closely followed by lord Benton Glover marked by the flashy scarlet blazon with a silver mailed fist on his breastplate. Behind them rode the rest of his entourage wearing the uniform of the Stark houseguard.

It was a silent procession. Everyone looked sweaty and miserable. ‘Perhaps I’ve been pushing us too hard’, Ned mused. According to the young boy they had picked up at the previous inn, it would be another hour before they reached a small village with an inn that could provide a hearty meal and shelter for the night. Arthur, the young boy, had agreed to provide his services as a temporary guide in return for protection during his travels to meet up with his sister who lived further south.

Ned sighed once again and thought of his wife, Catelyn formerly of house Tully. How was the lady of Winterfell faring at Riverrun, a pregnant lady Stark who had not laid eyes on her new home yet? It had been a year since their hasty marriage and bedding. Before setting out on this quest, he had received word that Catelyn had birthed a healthy son. ‘The Gods have truly blessed us.’ Ned looked up to the heavens and his mood lightened a bit.

The proud Lady Catelyn of house Tully, daughter of the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands had been betrothed to his elder brother but after his untimely death at the hands of the Mad King, Ned had had to step in to form the necessary alliance with the Riverlands. It was all masterminded by Jon Arryn, a firm alliance between the North, the Vale, the Riverlands and the Stormlands by intermarriages.

Ned was left no choice. His dream to share a simple life with the noble lady he had met at the tourney of Harrenhal, living with her in a small keep as loyal bannerman to his elder brother was irrevocably shattered. Instead he got a political marriage, the responsibility for the entire North and a cool proud stranger in his bed the night before he left for war. The alliances were secured. Everyone had done their part, except for Lyanna. It all had started with Lyanna.

Finally they had found a trail. Hope had come in the form of an anonymous message stating she was
in Dorne. A message he believed to be true because there was a post scriptum in her hand. It was hardly legible but he recognized her writing all the same. It was her hand that had written the words: “I need help, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives. Please come.” He was so conflicted when thinking of Lyanna, his favorite sibling with her fate unknown. Was she to be envied since she was the only one who had escaped a political marriage? Or was she to be pitied because she had been separated from their pack, and a lone wolf is always in danger. He didn’t believe the stories of her kidnapping.

It would have been a difficult thing to successfully kidnap her against her will. And even then, she would have found a way to escape or at least get a message through to someone. Lyanna was resourceful, brave, intelligent and a fighter. No, Ned was convinced she had either eloped with Rhaegar or someone had helped her escape Harrenhal to prevent her marriage with Robert Baratheon, his former best friend.

However, now the country was in chaos after the Rebellion. The routes were dangerous and Rhaegar was dead. The newly self proclaimed King Robert, ‘King by conquest and blood’ had not yet had time to restore order in his realm. What had happened to her? Where and why was she hiding in Dorne of all places?

His musings were interrupted when the young boy, Arthur called for his attention. He pointed towards a dark spot in the distance. “Can you see that Lord Stark? We’re just a few miles out. I can see the main building of the village on that small rise. Can you see it?”

Ned smiled at the boy and turned his head towards his companions. “We’re almost there guys, I cannot speak for you all, but I for one am looking forward to a nice meal and a roof over our heads tonight.” A lot of “ayes” greeted him back. The small company seemed revived and picked up the pace.

The inn was large enough to provide accommodations for their entire party and had adequate room to stable their horses. The common room of the inn was mostly empty. Only two tables were occupied by suntanned southerners. Ned acknowledged them with a short nod and headed for the opposite area which contained large tables to seat his entire group. In no time they were enjoying a wholesome meal and soon enough full bellies and Dornish wine had most of the men fighting to keep awake. One by one they drifted upstairs glad to be able to sleep in a real bed for once.

Ned and Lord Howland Reed were the only ones still at the table. In the corner Arthur, their young guide had found an acquaintance and was playing cyvasse.

Ned and Howland were talking strategies. The message that had begged him to come to this part of Dorne was not all that clear. They had almost reached the area stipulated in the scroll. What now? Would it be safe to start asking around whether anyone had seen a northern looking woman? Their party stood out like a sore thumb. Would people want to help them, would they put Lyanna in jeopardy when they openly declared their intentions? Probably not a good idea. Lyanna was one of the instigators of the Rebellion if you would believe all the stories being told in Westeros. Either she was a selfish seductress who was guilty of starting a war killing thousands of good men, or she was an innocent victim being kidnapped and raped by another evil Targaryen.

They were almost out of options. Ned had hoped to receive another clue along the way, he had been screening each and everyone since crossing the Dorne borders, but as of yet nothing had happened. Too tired for to come up with new ideas, the pair of them decided to take a stroll outside and check on the horses before retiring.

Ned was just about to enter the stables when he felt a large presence behind him. He automatically gripped his sword and saw Howland mimic his gesture. Next thing he noticed was the young boy
Arthur running up to him. “Lord Stark! Lord Stark, may I present my friend to you please?”

Ned turned around and saw a large man holding up his two hands as if surrendering.

“I come in peace Lord Stark. Please can we talk?”

Ned looked the man over, he seemed familiar but Ned couldn’t place him. Ned with his twenty namedays was already a hardened warrior, a war veteran. The other man however had probably ten years on him and stood half a head taller, where Ned was still lanky the man’s muscles were more defined. He looked like a dangerous opponent. Howland Reed moved to stand beside Ned, ready to protect his Lord.

Ned straightened himself up trying to look taller and answered the stranger with as much authority as he could muster: “I reckon young Arthur told you my name. I however am not that lucky. Please identify yourself my lord.”

A hint of a smile appeared on the taller man’s face. “Names are not important”, he countered roughly. “Just know that I mean you no harm. We need to talk. We can help each other. You can call me White.” Ned glanced at Howland. The name “White” didn’t help him any further, it didn’t strike him as his truthful name anyhow. There was still the niggling thought that he knew the man from somewhere. “Ok, Lord White”, he decided, “I’m listening.”

“Let’s make ourselves comfortable”, the man uttered while walking in the direction of a secluded spot behind the stables, “this could take a while”. Ned and Howland complied.

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The next morning, a well rested group was noisily breaking their fast in the common room as Ned joined them. He had to restrain himself. ‘First eat in peace’, he told himself. He knew there would be upheaval after his communication. He joined his companions at the table and tried to enjoy his meal hearing the end of a bawdy tale that the Greatjon was telling. When the tale reached its hilarious end the men showed their appreciation by stamping and laughing, Ned knew he could wait no longer. He had to tell them now before anyone left the table. He braced himself. He needed to be strong to inform them that their quest was over. As far as they would know, they had failed. They would be bringing Lyanna’s body home to be buried. The other news had to stay hidden at all cost. He had to adhere to the plan they had put together yesterday night. There was a silver lining for his men however. They would be going home.

Chapter End Notes

A short prologue to start, more like a teaser really.

Next up: Ned returns to Winterfell and something happens in Dorne.
Homecoming

Chapter Summary

Ned comes home with his wife and heir. Benjen and Ned exchange information. In Dorne, a package arrives. Oberyn is delighted, Doran not as much.

Chapter Notes

I relented and put up some relationship tags. Not all of them, I still want to keep you guessing a bit. The rest of them will be added as the story unfolds. I want to make clear however that although the tags speak of “Jon Snow”, Jon will go by a different last name, a trueborn name, a temporary alias to keep him safe. His real name will be Aegon Targaryen. I didn’t want Jon to grow up with the bastard stigma weighing him down. I need an assertive protagonist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was raining the day Ned finally caught his first glance of Winterfell. Slowly but surely each detail of the imposing structure came into focus: the large towers, the main gate, the grey direwolf banners. ‘Was it his imagination or were there more banners than usual decorating the stronghold?’

Ned could just picture the scenes going on inside the castle at the moment. Everyone would be dropping what they were doing and hurrying into the courtyard to form a greeting line as was the custom. They all knew that this time it would be their new Lord at the gates with his bride and recently born heir. So he guessed the courtyard would be filled to the brim, with just enough place left to accommodate their caravan.

He was not wrong. A large crowd of nobles and servants stood lined up inside the courtyard. His eyes immediately found the solemn figure of his younger brother. He was flanked by Maester Luwin, Rodrik Cassel, the Greatjon, Maege Mormont and Rickard Karstark. It was still a strange concept that they were all subservient to him now. Ned’s eyes roved further over the crowd. He recognized a lot of the Stark household but also saw plenty of new faces. He dismounted. A stable boy ran forward and made clumsy bow. The lad stammered “Welcome home My Lord” and led the horse away. Ned released the breath he didn’t know he had been holding. He was home.

Feeling calmer now, Ned went over to the spot where the wheelhouse had stopped. He would greet everyone with his southern bride at his side, immediately solidifying her position to the Northern Lords and their household. The soft murmuring of the crowd stopped, everyone’s eyes were now trained on the figures emerging from the wheelhouse.

They had been waiting for this moment for some time. Although the Rebellion had ended several moons ago and life in the North had resumed, at Winterfell everyone had still had been waiting for the young Lord and his family to come home. Not only had Lord Stark journeyed to the other end of Westeros to find his poor sister who now was buried in the crypt, he had also been delayed for several more weeks at Riverrun. Ned had stayed at
his wife’s ancestral home with his good family until his son, Robb, was strong enough to make the trip home.

Lady Catelyn accepted her husband’s helping hand. She stepped out into the courtyard and caught the first glimpses of her new home. She was not impressed. Though Winterfell was a large structure with several buildings and imposing towers, it lacked the sophistication of the buildings in the South. Everything looked robust, well kept, but she couldn’t quite grasp what it was that she found wanting, perhaps the absence of colour? Grey was the dominant colour, the only exception being the wooden outer buildings but those were a dreary dark brown. She would think on it some more later.

Ned still holding her hand led her towards the assembled crowd who were all looking at her with awe and apprehension. ‘She would be their Lady’, she realized. ‘They would have to follow her command.’ Catelyn made sure to pay attention so as to remember as much names as possible. She plastered a smile on her face and readied herself to issue some polite greetings as expected of the well-bred Lady of Winterfell.

She watched Benjen pull Ned into a firm hug. “Welcome home, brother. Winterfell is yours”, Benjen greeted and reluctantly released his hold on his elder brother. “Glad to be finally home,” Ned smiled. He looked his brother over. “All is well?” “All is as well as can be”, Benjen responded seriously his eyes relaying a myriad of feelings. “We will talk later?” “As soon as I can get myself free from all this, I’ll send for you. I’m eager to talk as well”, was Ned’s hushed reply. He tried to get some clues from his brother’s body language. He was keen to know all the details of his brother’s endeavours but knew he needed to be patient a bit longer.

Benjen turned towards Catelyn and bowed. “Well met once more good sister. You look as beautiful as ever. Let me be the first to welcome you to Winterfell and wish you a prosperous life here in the North.”

Catelyn curtsied. “Thank you Lord Stark. That is our hope as well.” She looked over to Ned who smiled reassuringly at her.

Her husband turned around, now facing the wet nurse who was holding his son and gestured her to approach. He gently took the baby from her hands and lifted the little bundle into the air for all to see. “Good people of the North”, his voice boomed over the courtyard, “Let me present to you my firstborn son and heir, Robb Stark, the future Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.” A loud cheer welled up from the crowd.

Everyone was smiling and Catelyn felt a bit of warmth welling up in her chest for the first time since entering the courtyard. ‘She had done this. She had gifted the North with a new generation. She would get these rugged, stern Northmen to accept the southern bride of their Lord. She would show them she was worthy.’

“Let me introduce you to some of my most trusted bannermen, my Lady.”

Catelyn had some trouble taking her eyes of her son who was still sleeping through all the noise and commotion. Ned had repositioned Robb firmly against his body, his big arms creating a nest that shielded the small baby from the Northern winds. He represented the perfect picture of a proud and caring father. With renewed confidence she focussed her attention back to her duties and followed her husband ready to meet the noble lords waiting patiently in the receiving line and put her formal education to good use. Her cheeks were stiff from smiling when introductions were finally over and Ned led her into the keep.
Finally alone, Catelyn sat on the large bed in her new quarters. The handmaid had just finished her duties and had given her new Lady some welcome privacy. She took the opportunity to evaluate the first few hours in her new home. The service as of yet had been impeccable. Several young girls had worked quietly and efficiently together. Her bath had quickly been filled, the temperature of the water just as she liked it. When the water had cooled, Catelyn had denied the softly uttered suggestion of her handmaid to add more hot water. The girl had helped her step out of her bath and had willingly obeyed her every demand. Catelyn’s first impression of the Stark household was positive. Winterfell seemed like a well-organized community.

The temperature of the room had been a pleasant surprise. Ned, she remembered, had explained to her previously that Winterfell was built on hot springs and that pipes with warm water flowing through them were embedded in the walls of the large keep. At least it would not be so cold inside.

Although it was still summer, the last few days on the road she had gratefully made use of the warm cloak that Ned had put around her shoulders during their wedding ceremony. The heavy furs on the collar had seemed a bit much to her at the time but she had come to appreciate its usefulness. She made a mental note to make the necessary adjustments to the rest of her wardrobe as soon as possible.

When she had left the little antechamber that was her new bathroom to enter the bedroom once more, the maids had almost finished unpacking her things. Her personal toiletries were displayed on a small cabinet adorned with a large mirror. A cosy looking seat stood next to it. She ignored it in favour of the bed, the bed she would probably share with Ned tonight.

Ned was a good husband, solemn, respectful, rather good looking in his Northern way but boring. They had been married for more than a year now but circumstances had prevented them from hardly spending any time together.

It had been a disappointment to her when she had learned how different from Brandon he actually was. Catelyn had been infatuated with Brandon at first sight. His larger than life personality had attracted her immediately. When Brandon was present, everyone flocked to him. He was the center of focus at every gathering. All the ladies’ eyes followed him longingly. Brandon had been a catch.

Back then, she had barely noticed that he had two younger brothers. Even now, after several moons spent together, she hardly knew Ned. They were the joint parents of a little boy but the father of her child was still a stranger to her. ‘Well, she would try to make a life here. Family, Duty, Honour were the words of house Tully. She would do her duty to her new family.’

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Ned entered his chambers. It was almost dinnertime. Just enough time to refresh himself and escort his new wife to the great hall where they would dine in large company. His talk with Benjen would still have to wait.

After showing his wife her new quarters, Ned had been accosted by Maester Luwin. They had isolated themselves in his solar and had sifted through the numerous scrolls that had not been forwarded to Riverrun. A few of them were still unopened in adherence to the strict rules Ned had instigated.

‘Benjen has come through’, Ned thought. His brothers had been charged to instruct the Maester how to decode the wax seals on the scrolls in order to know which ones he was allowed to open and
which ones were for the eyes of the Warden of the North only. Ned trusted Maester Luwin implicitly. However, he had wanted to convey the political situation to Maester Luwin in person. They had to tread carefully. Everyone involved would be in danger. In the eyes of the realm, everyone in the know would be branded a traitor to King Robert. If the wrong person got wind of their actions, their lives would be forfeit.

The most pressing business having been handled, Maester Luwin had left the solar and had gone to his quarters to carry out Lord Stark’s orders. They had agreed to reconvene the next day to tackle the less urgent matters.

Entering his bedroom, Ned immediately took steps to secure the still unopened scrolls. He pulled the wolfskin rug that decorated the floor at to foot end of his bed away from its current place and lifted a large stone to reveal a hollow space below floor level. He placed the messages inside the secret hideout. It was the safest place he could think of.

‘No time to read them now, I will retrieve them later before my talk with Benjen’, he promised himself. He put the stone and the rug back into their original position and dropped into the nearest chair. ‘Thank the Gods. I’m finally back in my beloved Winterfell’.

Life at Riverrun had not been easy for him. At home, he knew how everything was supposed to go. But in the South, there were all kinds of habits and niceties that were foreign to him. People talked but hardly said anything meaningful and when they finally did, they played around with their words in such a way that Ned was often uncertain of their real intent.

He had felt adrift in a strange land instead of being relaxed while surrounded by family. His new wife had had her own routines and had always been occupied either with their new born son or with some other matter that ladies apparently attended to. He had been trying to keep busy and had made an effort to get along with his good father and good brother but it did not come easy to him.

It had all been a struggle and he had counted the days until he could be in his beloved North again, surrounded by his loyal bannermen. The lords of the North could be stubborn and difficult, but at least they spoke his language and didn’t play stupid word games.

‘Winterfell is my home. Here I have purpose, here I can make an impact and my people need me.’ For the first time in years Ned felt he was exactly were he was supposed to be. He knew he would be extremely busy the coming moons but looked forward to it.

He would be putting things in his Kingdom back in order and make plans to preparing the North for the coming Winter. ‘Yes, that is my birthright. It may still be summer now but I know winter is coming’, Ned recited the Stark words to himself. Perhaps I will even have to prepare enough provisions to survive a war’, he sighed, ‘I will need to make plans for more contingencies than ever before’. Nevertheless, Ned relished the busy period ahead.

‘Southerners can’t grasp that. They are spoiled and have grown soft. My wife will have difficulty to adapt. I will have to help her.’

‘His wife’, Ned contemplated his predicament. ‘How do you get to know someone better when you hardly get to see her and you haven’t the faintest idea how she fills her days?’ At Riverrun, her body had still been recuperating from the birth and she had preferred to sleep alone in her own rooms. The only time they spent together was often nothing more than a short, formal meeting after dinner. She would come to his bedroom, still fully dressed and they would talk some, but not much more would be said to each other except some polite inquiries into their respective days. Still, she would
always tell him something new about his son. Much too soon to his liking, she would request permission to retire. She would then leave him with a dutiful kiss on his cheek and disappear swiftly into her own bedroom.

‘Another strange habit’, Ned had thought, ‘one that I will change now we’re home. I will make sure I visit her chambers. She will have nowhere to retreat to.’

After their first rather clumsily bedding on their wedding night just hours before he had to leave for war, things were at a standstill. Ned hoped that since they were on his territory now, she would have to rely on him to learn her way around the keep and the household and they would be spending more time together. More important still, at Winterfell he would be the Lord and she would have to obey him. No more adhering to the southern customs of her family. They were in his beloved North now. Here he knew how to act!

His heart was lighter when he knocked on the door that separated the Lord’s and Lady’s chambers half an hour later to escort his wife to the great hall for dinner. ‘All would be well. He would see to it.’

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That evening, Lady Catelyn sat formally next to her husband at the high table. Both were dressed up as befitted their station. A welcome home feast had been prepared in their honour and the great hall was filled with family, friends even some servants were present at the lower tables.

For the first time she saw her solemn husband relax and smile. He clearly was glad to be home. Catelyn eyed the abundant display of food. The rich aroma’s wafting her way reminded her how long ago her last meal had been. Her husband filled her plate with a healthy portion of some kind of stew. Catelyn accepted it from him with a shy smile. She immediately started eating, the food was as delicious as it smelled. She tried to eat slowly minding her manners knowing full well that the northern lords and servants were eyeing her every move.

Ned noticed her getting a bit self conscious. He leaned towards her and silently remarked “Give them time. Let them get to know you. They will come to love their new Lady. But for now they are just curious. Let them study you. That is to be expected. In no time they will be sharing their exaggerated tales with you”, he paused looking around before continuing, “which may be sooner than we think, by the looks of the amounts of ale being consumed.” Smiling broadly he handed her a piece of bread and continued his meal.

A few moments later he addressed her once more. “We will be inviting all the lords of the North to come to Winterfell in a few moon’s time to celebrate the birth of the new heir of Winterfell. Best use this occasion to practice getting along with this lot. After all practice makes perfect.” He winked.

Perplexed Catelyn eyed her husband. It was not the impending task of organizing a feast for the northern lords that had her flabbergasted. No, it was the almost teasing tone of Ned’s last few sentences. Did she hear correctly? Had her solemn husband tried to lighten the mood?

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Catelyn was ready to retire. Ned had left her an hour earlier with the promise to meet up with her in her chambers. He had excused himself, stating he needed to catch up with his brother but had requested that she wait up for him. He had looked firmly at her but with a hint of pleading in his eyes. She had known her only option was to gracefully agree and had silently nodded her head.
The handmaid had left here alone once more. She was dressed in her nightshift, her hair arranged into two proper braids, she was ready for the night. After saying her night prayers, she had installed herself on the bed and had pulled the heavy furs on top of her. She had tried to read the book she had brought with her from Riverrun but had not been able to read one single page. She was just about to give up when she heard a knock on a door she hadn’t even noticed was there.

Ned entered her chambers in large determent strides. Apparently that door led to his quarters. “Are you well?” Ned asked, “Do you have enough furs? Is the fire stoked high enough for you?”

Catelyn looked up. She was blushing as a maid. ‘Ridiculous, I am a wife and a mother’, she told herself.

Ned shed the large grey robe he was wearing which left him in a white cotton shirt. She couldn’t help but shiver when Ned moved to sit beside her on the bed. He started to look nervous when she still hadn’t responded to his questions.

“Are you all right?” he repeated his grey eyes intently gazing into hers. “Did you find all you needed?”

“Yes, of course, thank you”, she finally replied a bit intimidated by his unwavering stare.

“I would very much like to bed you tonight”, Ned told her bluntly, “Will you let me?”

‘Well, it was kind of him to ask …’

Catelyn saw a blush appear on his cheeks but there was also an iron determination in his eyes. This was another Ned than the formal husband she had lived with at Riverrun, nor was he the considerate but distant travel companion on the road these last few weeks. This was the Lord of Winterfell who had come to her bed. Although polite and respectful, Catelyn saw for the first time a glimpse of a powerful, noble man who could be an autocratic be it thoughtful Lord and husband, a husband who would be strong and intelligent enough to protect her and their offspring.

Strangely this realisation didn’t scare her. Quite the opposite really, she felt her body respond to him with the same butterflies she used to feel during the few flirty conversations she had had with Brandon Stark. She even felt a tingling between her legs. Now it was her turn to blush. Looking straight at him she answered bravely, “You’re my husband, it is expected.”

“I’ll try to make it better for you”, he stated and he wasted no time taking her firmly into his arms now that he had her consent. “I know the first time is difficult for a woman. And with the war looming over our heads, well let’s just say, I didn’t, I wasn’t…”

Catelyn put her hand over his mouth, “sssh”, she said, “let us both try to do better”. She closed the last bit of space between them and kissed him.

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The next morning Catelyn woke up with a warm body lying beside her. Ned hadn’t left. After he had worshipped her body in ways previously unknown to her, he had fallen asleep almost immediately after finishing inside her. He had just had enough energy to roll of her and spoon up behind her. She had had no choice but to try and fall asleep with a heavy arm around her waist, her legs sticky with his seed, most of it still deeply ensconced inside of her. Surprisingly she had felt tired
and strangely satisfied. Before she knew it sleep had overtaken her as well.

Catelyn turned her head to study her husband. Ned was still asleep. He looked younger now. Seeing him like this, it was hard to believe he was the Warden of the North who had the power to decide the life and death of tens of thousands of subjects.

The first rays of morning light fell upon her husband’s face and revealed a few small scars he had obtained during the war. Catelyn didn’t know how to feel about him still being in her chambers, both still naked, his legs keeping one of hers pinned to the bed. This was new territory for her. Luckily Ned was like a hot furnace keeping the bed warm enough to ignore the chill in the room now the fire had almost gone out.

‘Was this what married couples did?’ She wasn’t sure. The septa’s hadn’t prepared her for this myriad of feelings. Nobody had told her how her body could respond to his. She was only taught to obey her husband and do her duty. Give him heirs and daughters to make alliances.

But somehow his passion had stirred some unladylike responses. At first she had tried to fight these unfamiliar feelings. While Ned was coupling with her, something strange had been building inside her and she had strained all her muscles to prevent herself from letting him see any wanton responses. Ned however had not let her keep still. He had urged her to relax, to let go, to let herself feel. He had touched her everywhere with his hands. ‘Oh when she let herself remember how his fingers had touched her down there, and Gods his mouth…’

He had told her that he loved the little noises she made and had reassured her that the walls of the keep were thick enough, that this was between the two of them. In here they could indulge themselves. They were married, this was no sin. This was sanctified by the Gods. And Catelyn had let herself be persuaded.

If this was what married couples did, well, she would adhere to the Tully words ‘Family, Duty, Honour’. Perhaps it wasn’t such a daunting task after all to give the Warden of the North plenty of heirs. She shivered. It really was cold this morning. Catelyn nestled herself closer to her husband’s warm body. Perhaps husbands and wives slept in the same bed for more than one reason in this dreary North. She let sleep overtake her once more.

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The night before in the Lord’s solar:

Benjen sipped from his ale while his brother was scanning several scrolls. They had retired to this brother’s solar and would finally be able to relate what they each had achieved these last few moons. Ned had given orders not to be disturbed. Benjen waited for his brother to start.

Ned put the messages he had been reading aside and focussed his intent stare on Benjen. “Tell me first, how he is doing? Was the journey uneventful? Is he safe? Is he healthy?”

“Be calm, brother. He is fine. He is as safe as can be for the moment”, Benjen reassured Ned. A big smile broke over his face.

“He is bonny and a real Stark. He is a little Lyanna reborn. He has the cutest dark coloured hair that has started to curl adoringly. You would not think he had any Targaryen blood if you didn’t know to look for it. His eyes are the Stark grey. It seems to me only his fine cheekbones and the form of his
“He is an active little fellow. He is always looking around, studying all that his baby eyes can see. He tries to grab everything within reach and puts it in his mouth when you’re not fast enough to prevent it.” Benjen finished his passionate description of their little nephew.

“Perhaps we should have gone for another solution? We could have brought him to Winterfell proclaiming him my trueborn son? I would not have minded a hasty marriage, even to his nurse, to be able to raise him as my own. He has already stolen my heart in just these few moons. Ned, could we perhaps change our plan?” Benjen took a deep breath and looked beseechingly at his big brother.

“And how would you explain the presence of his guards?” Ned retorted. “I told you how they would not give up their King, not even to his closest family. I feel for you Benjen, really I do. Don’t you think that I want him here, where we both can see him grow up and protect him ourselves? It was me who promised Lyanna to keep him safe. He is my blood too! But I had to see reason.”

Ned moved closer to his brother and made a comforting gesture. “Benjen, please understand, Winterfell is the center of the North. A lot of people would get to meet him, and our three guards would not want to let him out of their sight. In the Driftmark, these knights can hopefully remain incognito. Here it would be a matter of days, hours probably before someone noticed them. No disguise can be complete enough to make these three unrecognizable. Ser Gerold Hightower, Ser Oswell Whent, and certainly Ser Arthur Dayne are some of the most prominent heroes of Westeros. No to mention all of the Seven Kingdoms have been wondering for moons now what could have happened to them. Have you forgotten how easily Varys or Littlefinger can get wind of anything happening in the realm?”

Ned settled back into his chair. “No, raising him at Winterfell is out of the question. No matter our wishes. The important thing is to keep Jon safe and to adhere to the plan we all have agreed on.” “Now tell me, please, how was the journey to the Driftmark, how has everyone settled in? What protective measures are being taken?” Ned urged once more.

Benjen realised Ned was right to be impatient. He had hardly answered any of his brother’s initial questions. He ordered his thoughts and started his report.

“They told me Arthur Dayne used his connections in Dorne to secure them a ship to take us to the Driftmark. You should have seen them: the three of them dressed like farmers, Howland Reed in his habitual green attire, Wylla, his nurse disguised as a Septa carrying a small babe. When I met up with them on that small island as per your instructions, I almost missed them. I was looking for three tall proud knights but instead found three poorly looking farmers with slightly drooped shoulders trying to blend in and not attract too much attention. If it weren’t for Howland Reed and their luggage, I would have missed them.

Benjen paused and sipped his ale. “Let me tell you Ned, your friend Howland Reed is a strange fellow. He seemed to know instinctively who could be trusted and who needed to be avoided. He apparently seemed to recognize the name of the captain of the ship. Some distant relation to his wife or something. His contacts in the Driftmark proved true as well. Jon has been adopted by the elderly Lord and Lady Velaryon, distant cousins to the ruling lord of House Velaryon lord of the Driftmark.”
“I must concur, Lord Reed’s suggestion of the Driftmark was brilliant. Having seen it with my own eyes, I can testify that the Driftmark being a modest island in Blackwater Bay near Dragonstone is the perfect place to hide our True King. The inhabitants don’t interact much with the mainland. And as Howland Reed had promised us, they are all loyal to house Targaryen to a fault. They are proud of their heritage, originating from Old Valeria themselves. I have had to listen to several grand tales of how their forefathers landed in Westeros long before the Targaryens ever saw Dragonstone for the first time.”

Benjen was on a roll now.
“The elderly couple have welcomed Jon and Wylla into their home and are glad with the extra company and help. Jon poses as their grandson, their own son being killed on the Trident. Our knights take turns guarding him. The three of them have taken up quarters in a small cottage that lies within clear view of their King’s new home.”

“They tell everyone who wants to know how the three of them and Jon’s father were a tight group of fight buddies. And as happens often in times of war they had all allegedly sworn to each other to look after one another’s family should any of them not survive the war. Jon’s mother of course having died in childbirth it was their duty to bring the orphaned baby to his closest living relations. “

“Then they complete their story by explaining that they do not really have anywhere to go to and have decided to settle in the Driftmark. They state that they are glad to lead a peaceful life now, helping the community out with small chores and serving as protection against thieves and poachers. So far nobody suspects anything. For the moment Jon is as safe as he could be while still living in Westeros.”

Ned relaxed a bit after Benjen’s tale. “Well, let’s hope for the best then. I’ll beg the Gods to help us protect him.”

He picked up one of the scrolls.
“I have news as to the other matters. First, our contact has arrived in Fleabottom and states he is making progress. Another message is from Lannister Port. Things there are also going according to plan. The first steps have been taken. Soon it will be time to reconvene with our sympathizers to discuss further strategies.”

Ned rose stiffly from his seat. “Let’s call it a night. We’ll have plenty of opportunity to talk some more during the next few days. I reckon you don’t have to leave before the next sennight?”

Benjen nodded at Ned with an impish smile on his face. “Off to bed or off to the wife?”

Ned answered with a week smile and left the solar after making sure he had the scrolls safely tucked away in his pockets. He strode towards his bedroom.

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Interlude1: Dorne

Some months after the event of the previous chapter:

Oberyn Martell was abruptly awoken by a servant. “My Prince, you are requested to appear before Prince Doran. And make haste, the Prince stressed the urgency of my message. Please my Prince, hurry or I will be punished.”

Oberyn’s eyebrows rose. This was unprecedented. His brother never threatened the younger servants
over something this trivial. His siesta was over it seemed. He quickly disentangled his limbs from Ellaria’s and, made himself presentable. He left to go find his elder brother.

He heard a lot of noises coming from the great hall. It seemed he was not the only one summoned. However, of all the things he could have imagined to see when he entered the room, the sight that greeted him was as unexpected as it was welcome.

With a wide grin on his face he looked over to his brother. Prince Doran sat in his usual chair and greeted him with troubled eyes. Oberyn could not fathom why. ‘Was this not a reason to celebrate?’ He couldn’t imagine any better surprise. ‘Oh, the things he would be able to do and say now. How best to take revenge, in what manner …’

His thoughts halted when Prince Doran abruptly rose from his chair and gestured Oberyn to follow him out of the hall. Bemused Oberyn obeyed him, his eyes reluctantly leaving the sight of a bruised and battered heavily chained Ser Gregor Clegane who was sitting in the middle of the room inside a large wooden crate only visible because two sides of the crate had been opened and lowered to the ground.

Safely secluded in Doran’s private quarters, Oberyn tried to be patient and waited for his brother to start the conversation. His brother looked deeply troubled. After several minutes Oberyn tried for the obvious.

“Isn’t this a good development brother? Who captured him?”

Prince Doran seemed to be looking for words. He opened his mouth, closed it again, repeated this one more time and finally seemed to come to a decision. He slowly removed a scroll from his sleeve and handed it to his brother.

“Read it”, he ordered.

Oberyn’s curiosity grew. He accepted the scroll and started to read.

Prince Doran,
Please accept our gift. The content of the crate is yours to dispose of as you please. We only entreat you to inflict no harm upon the delivery team. We rely upon your honour.
It is our pleasure to help bring justice to your kin. No longer worry about the other culprit. He won’t be heard of again. Maybe one day you would be willing to return the favour?
Until then,
Kin of your kin

“What can be the meaning of this? The other culprit? Have you heard anything about the Lannister devil lately? Surely they allude to him. Who do you think sent this message? What would they want from us? Isn’t this good news though? This is surely sent by allies of ours, don’t you agree? Who could it be: ‘Kin of our kin’? How were the scroll and the crate even delivered here? What do you know of this? Can I be the one to end his miserable life?” Oberyn fired these questions at his brother. Although the message confused him, overall the content was exhilarating!

Doran sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t know and that is what troubles me. But yes, you can be the one to carry out justice in whatever way you want. However, we will need to strategize. We need to make sense of this. We need to contact all our spies in the Seven Kingdoms. I will even send word out overseas. We need to get to the bottom of this and fast. I want answers.”
Doran seemed very troubled.

Oberyn however could not be deterred. “Brother, how was the crate delivered? Did the scroll arrive with it or was it sent by raven? What haven’t you told me?”
Doran looked up to his brother “Stop pacing in front of me. My nerves are on edge enough as it is without you aggravating matters. Sit down and I’ll tell you all I know, little that it is.”

Oberyn obeyed without hesitation he quickly seated himself opposite his brother. He folded his hands in his lap and encouraged his brother to tell it all. “Let’s hear it brother”, he said in a low tone.

Doran started “The crate was delivered by a Northern vessel belonging to house Manderly. They sailed here directly from Kings Landing. They were commissioned to bring the crate into my hands personally. Their client, so the delivery team stated, had paid double the required fee for their discretion and had given no name.”

“They were told we would be expecting it and would be grateful for its safe delivery. They also said they had gone to great trouble to deliver the subject alive and in a relative clean state having received detailed instructions on feeding and other necessary caretaking tasks. They were glad to finally be rid of the responsibility. They even asked me to sign a document confirming that I had received the cargo intact.”

“Further interrogation wasn’t possible since I had decided to adhere to the request in the scroll I had received a month ago. I felt honour bound to grant them safe passage back to their vessel.”

Doran paused but then decided to continue. “The scroll was sent by a raven from the Wall. My guess is that the sender is the long forgotten Targaryen, Maester Aemon who serves at the wall. I think he is still alive, though he must have seen at least ninety namedays by now.”

Oberyn startled “Targaryen? Targaryen! At the wall? Are you sure?”

“No I am not sure!” Doran shouted agitated. “That’s the problem. The people of the Night’s Watch are forbidden to interfere with the politics of the Seven Kingdoms. They must remain neutral. I do not know what to think. That’s what bothers me. Ever since the content of the package was revealed, I have been trying to figure this out. I have been racking my brain searching for the safest way to obtain more information. What do they want from us? How should we go forward without betraying our purpose?”

“We need to be smart about this Oberyn. For once I want you to think before you act. Help me figure this out. Be my eyes and ears outside of Dorne. I was thinking on the possibility of sending you on a tour throughout the Kingdoms so you can discreetly gather information about the current political situation.”

Oberyn stared at him deep in thought.

Doran continued, “Find out whether something happened to Tywin Lannister. See how the Baratheon King is doing. Try to ferret out how much support he really has? Are the Lannisters weakened? See if you can find a trace of any enemies to the crown who would want to destroy the Baratheon-Lannister alliance. Sniff out possible conspiracies against the throne if you can. The sending of this package is no charity. Clearly someone is reaching out to us, someone who is not sympathetic to the current dynasty.”

Oberyn was making a move to interrupt but Doran lifted his hand to stop him.

“Of course you may take all the time you need to dispose of our precious gift any way you like first. That goes without saying. We will discuss our next steps at length afterwards. I feel that whatever has been set in motion will take some time to build before any action can be taken openly, whatever whoever may intend. This is a dangerous game. If you take into account the careful wording of the
message and the anonymous delivery of the package, you can not help but notice that the people behind this are very cautious. Please leave me to my solitude now. I need to calm down and think on this some more.”

Doran closed his eyes and slumped in his chair. He felt drained of all energy. ‘No good can come of this’, he thought. ‘Why can't they leave us in peace?’

Oberyn on the other hand left the room with a spring in his step, his mind swirling with possibilities. ‘First things first’, he thought and a smug smile appeared on his face. ‘Time to fetch Ellaria from her bed, the sand snakes too’, he decided. ‘They will want to have their share of the fun.’

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter Jon will make an appearance.
Greywater Watch

Chapter Summary

Benjen visits Jon at Greywater Watch.
The Hound makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

Warning: If coarse language offends you, better stop reading this story. Sandor Clegane knows no other way of communicating. I also might have borrowed some dialogue from the screenwriters and GRRM, I just couldn’t resist the temptation. Let’s call it me paying them tribute. I’m also grateful for the Game of Thrones wiki.
This work is still unbeta’d so blame me for any mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Neck approximately four years later

“One more night and I’ll have a roof over my head”, Benjen thought. It was not his first visit to Lord Reed’s stronghold. He was seated a bit secluded from his travelling companions but still close enough to the fire to stay warm. The small delegation of brothers of the Night’s Watch that travelled with him was a part of his official mission. The Warden of the North had used his influence to negotiate advantageous trading deals for the Night’s Watch throughout the Seven Kingdoms. They would also be collecting the annual taxes the Lords of Westeros were levied to sustain the Night’s Watch. One of the many stops along the way was Greywater Watch. Additionally they were tasked to bring back as many new recruits as they could find.
Benjen was used to life on the road now. However travelling in a small group and keeping his real purpose a secret, had never been his forte. He was grateful for the companionship though.

Ever since he had let himself be persuaded by his elder brother not to say his Night’s Watch vows, his life had been an adventure. He had seen more of Westeros than almost anyone in the North. Never could he have dreamed up this kind of life for himself. None of the farfetched scenarios he had fantasized about during his youth ever since understanding the plight of a third son of a lord, had even come close to what his lot in life had turned out to be.

A few years ago, Benjen had thought he was done, finished. He had been stuck in Riverrun, doing nothing but drinking and blaming himself for everything: the Rebellion, the deaths of Brandon and his father and the loss of his sister. He had seen no way forward. He had lost almost everything he had held dear. His only grounding force had been his brother Ned. But Benjen had hardly been able to look him in the eye since he also partly blamed himself for the circumstances that had forced Ned to give up his lady love and to marry for political gain before going of to fight in a war that shouldn’t have been started in the first place.

And to make matters worse, when Ned had returned victoriously from the Rebellion, he had almost immediately left again, this time on a mission to find Lyanna and had ordered his younger brother to
stay put and look out for his pregnant wife. Benjen had been on the brink to forsake his life and go to the wall. He would freeze himself to death or be killed if not by wildlings then surely by one or other wild animal rumoured to live on the other side of the wall. He had felt he didn’t deserve another choice. He had been racked by guilt.

But then Ned had returned with news about his sister. And Benjen’s world had been turned on its head once more. It had taken Ned hours of reasoning to get through to Benjen who had at first spiralled deeper into his depression upon learning that Lyanna was dead. Lyanna, his dear sister, who had always been so full of life, was dead and he had been complicit. He had helped her escape to meet her Prince and evade the arranged betrothal to Robert. At the time Benjen’s choice had been a simple one. Not only had he been loyal to his sister to a fault, he had also agreed most fervently that Robert Baratheon was not a good match for her. Never could he have imagined what her flight had put into motion.

Benjen had never understood how Ned could not see past his friendship with Baratheon and discern his real character. Everybody who had eyes could see how he treated women. They were just bodies to stick his cock into and something to brag about afterwards to all and sundry when he was drunk enough. Robert would have strayed from Lyanna’s marriage bed almost immediately and frequently at that. Benjen had been sure of it. Robert had not loved Lyanna for her vibrant personality. He had loved the opportunity she represented. He would marry the beautiful sister of his dear foster brother making him a good brother and in one swell swoop build a strong alliance with the Northern most Kingdom. Lyanna’s spirit would have been broken in no time. Ned however hadn’t seen it that way.

“He is young”, Ned had tried to assure Benjen. “Marriage will settle him down.” Well, marriage with Cersei Lannister hadn’t settled Robert down at all. His proclivities had only increased these last few years. Stories about the King’s whoring and excessive drinking were told all over the Kingdom. The brothels in Kingslanding thrived.

When Benjen had uttered his plan to join the Night’s Watch to Ned upon his elder brother’s return from the South, Ned had denied him. His elder brother had used the most compelling argument to get Benjen to listen: Jon. The heated debate with Ned over his future had only taken a turn for the better when the true meaning of what his brother was talking about became clear. Benjen’s brain had slowly started to digest the true meaning of what Ned had been trying to tell him. The child meant a new life born from Lyanna’s womb. There was still a living piece of his sister in this realm, a trueborn Prince. ‘No, not a Prince, a King, the death of Rhaegar and the Mad King has put Jon - or King Aegon’, he mentally corrected himself, ‘first in line for the Iron Throne!’ Benjen had found his medicine for the darker thoughts that had plagued him the previous year. He would not become a brother of the Night’s watch.

Benjen looked at the fire that was slowly dying. “Time to call it a night” he called out to his companions. He straightened his stiff limbs and slowly walked over to the small tent he had erected earlier when they had stopped to make camp. “See you all in the morning. I trust you will look after the fire? “ A small pause and then he continued encouragingly , “If we ride hard, we will meet up with our guide before noon and have plenty of time to navigate the swamps while it is still light. We will reach Greywater Watch before dark. Goodnight.” The men all nodded and wished him a good night’s sleep as well.

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It was still a few hours before dusk when the small party reached the castle.
Benjen’s fellow travellers let out an almost simultaneous sigh of relief. They had been following the guide for more than an hour, traipsing through the swamps of the Neck in a single line all the while making sure to follow exactly in the footsteps of the crannogman that Lord Reed had sent out to meet up with them. They could finally relax and walk leisurely beside each other again.

Benjen looked toward the castle expectantly. Just as he had foreseen, a small figure exited the stronghold and ran straight at him as fast as his little legs allowed.

“Uncle Benjen, uncle Benjen, you’re here, you’re finally here!” The five year old leapt into the arms of his uncle clinging onto him with all the strength his little arms could muster.

Benjen swung him around a few times before putting him down again.

“Let me have a look at you then. My oh my, how you’ve grown. I can see you are eating your vegetables as you promised eh Jon.”

The little boy beamed up at him. “Yes uncle and meat and potatoes too. Come in and I show you the wooden sword I got from Art. They’re teaching me to fight and Art says if I listen good I get a real one!”

“It’s if you listen well.” Benjen corrected his nephew gently and ruffled his curls affectionately.

Benjen checked whether this travel companions were still close by. He saw that they had already been directed towards the stables and taken his own horse along so he could stay and greet the boy properly. He scanned the courtyard to see who Jon’s ever persistent shadow was this time.

“Nice to see you, Ser Gerold”, he greeted the knight. “Are all three of you here this time?”

“Nice to see you too Stark”, Gerold truly looked glad to see him. “It’s me and Ser Oswell. Ser Arthur is away on … business. Lord Reed will tell you all about that once were away from prying eyes and ears.”

Benjen took his nephew by the hand, a warm smile on his face. “Time to go look at that sword, don’t you think so Jon. Can you lead the way?” Beaming from ear to ear now, the little boy skipped ahead toward the castle dragging his uncle along. Ser Gerold hurriedly followed both of them inside.

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Benjen laughed indulgently at another statement of Jon. His nephew had been talking almost non-stop since Benjen’s arrival. Not that he minded. He was glad to see the boy again and also relieved to see for himself that he had adapted well to the change in his living arrangements. They had received a reassuring message from Lord Reed at Winterfell shortly before he had started out on this tour of the kingdoms, but seeing him with his own eyes had eased his worries. Jon had mentioned little Meera, Lord Reed’s three year old daughter often, but mostly he had been telling his uncle about his first training sessions with the wooden sword.

He had argued adoringly that it was high time he was allowed to use more than a stick now that he was almost five. Still he had complained at length that Sir Arthur often spend almost the entire duration of the lesson telling him how to stand properly and how to move, left, right, backward and forward. How Ser Arthur would push him out of the blue in an attempt to unbalance him and then would explain at length how best to correct his stance to prevent himself from falling over. “But”, he had pleaded, “I love to fight with my sword, uncle Benjen. Will you spar with me tomorrow? Ser Arthur is on a trip and Ser Oswell won’t mind, I think?”

Benjen had fond memories of himself constantly buggering Ned or Brandon to spar with him at that age and Ned being the one who mostly indulged his younger brother by showing him the moves he had learned from the master at arms during his required daily training.

“I will come out to the training yard tomorrow and teach you some blocks if you like”, he offered the small boy. “But only if Ser Gerold or Ser Oswell allow it”, he added as an afterthought.
Jon had hugged his uncle. “You’re the best uncle Benjen. I wished you could stay here with me forever.”

“Me too”, Benjen answered solemnly. “Me too. Perhaps in a few years? We’ll see. In the meantime I will visit you as often as I can. I promise. I will certainly drop by on my return journey.” He held his digit and middle finger up in a V-shaped form. “I swear.”

Jon mimicked the gesture. “I swear too?” He looked over to his uncle for assurance. Uncle Benjen only laughed in response and ruffled the boy’s hair affectionately once more.

“Come along. Let us see if we can find something to eat. I’m starving and I don’t know about you. Can you show me to way, Jon?”

His nephew’s facial expression changed completely. He looked confident once more.

“I can uncle. I never ever get lost any more.” The boy frowned. “But Lord Reed doesn’t seem to believe me cause he always sends Art or someone else along with me.” He complained. “And I know my way, truly uncle. I even help Meera sometimes and she has lived here longer than me already, but then…” he paused mulling it over, “perhaps that because she is still so small?”

“I think that could be it, nephew. Let’s get to it then? I told the truth when I said I was starving.”

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That night, after they had finally put Jon to bed, a difficult task this time since the little guy had been overexcited to have his uncle come visit, Lord Reed, Ser Gerold and Benjen retired to Howland Reed’s solar. Ser Oswell had taken up guard outside Jon’s bedroom and would be briefed later if necessary.

“Jon seems to have settled in all right at Greywater Watch?” Benjen opened the conversation since the men had been contemplating each other silently for some minutes, enjoying the peace and quiet now Jon had retired.

“He certainly has”, Lord Reed confirmed. “What’s more, my wife and I are glad to have him. He regularly plays with Meera. I think he likes not being the youngest one for a change. Meera has just turned three now and Jon likes to play act that he is a knight saving the little girl from ogres. I can’t wait to see how he will react to a new born. My lady wife is due in a moon’s time.”

“Don’t get me wrong it was a pity Edric Celtigar passed away. But in the few moons Jon has been here I have come to learn that moving him here to be fostered amongst the crannogmen at this particular time is a blessing in disguise.

“What do you mean by a blessing in disguise?” Benjen looked confused. He had been devastated when their seemingly ideal plan for raising Jon had been thwarted by the death of his “grandparent”. I thought there was no place for him more to grow up more suited than the Driftmark. Even if his cover would have been blown there, the community would have supported him one hundred per cent and now he’s here …”

“Greywater Watch is even safer.” Howland Reed retorted not letting him finish his sentence, his intense gaze directed at Benjen. He continued passionately raising his voice. “House Stark has no bannermen as loyal as House Reed. We swear our oath ‘by earth and water, by bronze and iron, by fire and ice’. The crannogmen would never betray the nephew of the Warden of the North. He is as safe here, well maybe even more so, than he was at the Driftmark.”

Forcing himself to calm down, Reed explained further “Our castle is one of the safest in Westeros. You’ve surely noticed that it is situated so deep in the swamplands of the Neck that the only way to
reach it safely is by being guided by a crannogman. Without our guidance this morning, you would most probably have drowned before getting even halfway to the castle. And even if you’ve been here once, I challenge you to try and find your way again. Not only are the paths treacherous and one false step can get you swallowed up by the swamps, Greywater Watch won’t be in the same place when you next visit. However improbable it may seem, I swear to you that it kind of moves. It is part of the natural environment of the Neck. No raven can find it and certainly no spy can enter it undetected.” Howland Reed paused to take a breath. “It is safe here”, he stressed once more.

He seemed hesitant for a moment but still decided to continue. “We have a powerful greenseer here as well. Another point in our favour, but that was not what I was alluding to”, he ended mysteriously.

Benjen and Ser Gerold both stared at him shocked by this declaration. However neither of them uttered a word, but just looked expectantly at Lord Reed wanting him to continue.

Howland Reed seemed to mull over the best way to explain himself.

“Aegon, “
“His name is Jon for now.” Benjen couldn’t help correcting immediately.
“As I told you before”, Lord Reed countered patiently, “we’re safe here from prying ears. But I’ll oblige you. Jon has the blood of the two most powerful bloodlines in the Seven Kingdoms: blood of the Dragons and blood of the Kings of Winter. Both lines possess powerful magic. If you combine them …”

Benjen's eyes were as big like saucers now.
“Magic in the Stark’s blood?” he uttered unbelievingly.

“The Kings of Winter had the ability to warg. Don’t you recognize the term from stories your old Nan told you at Winterfell? The Starks of old could enter into an animals mind, they could either completely take it over, or share its mind depending on the mental capabilities of said animal. Still, every generation at least one Stark emerges who has the potential to become a warg. Only the knowledge on how to develop this ability has been lost to you and none of you are even able to recognize the early symptoms should they occur, as far as I have observed.”

“I’ve seen several signs already that this ‘Stark’-ability is awakening in Jon which is abnormal at such a young age. My guess is that the Dragonblood in him will enhance his warg powers. Let’s just say that Jon will have to be tutored carefully and who better to do that than us Crannogmen. We know what we’re dealing with. Our blood also contains some magic. We inherited it from the First Men just as the Starks, but our unique way of living in close connection to nature has seemingly helped to conserve our magic. In almost every generation a greenseer is born at Greywater Watch. He has green dreams but can warg as well.”

Benjen stared at him chocked by this declaration. His mind was reeling. He tried to silence the many questions popping up in his mind and forced himself to focus on the issue at hand: Jon. He made a mental note to revisit this subject another time. He would like to have a description of these “early symptoms”.

“But was does this mean for Jon exactly?” Benjen still felt unbalanced. The entire situation was slipping through his fingers. Half an hour ago he had felt on top of the world. Jon looking up to him as the best uncle in the world had boosted his self-confidence. Now he was out of his depth. He had to know more in order to be able to help his nephew.

“It means that we will start with little mental exercises with the boy without him knowing their real purpose at first. Next, I guess at the latest within a year from now, I will gift him with a puppy. Jon will learn to share its mind. Since we are able to lead him gradually into this ability at such a tender
age, it will eventually become very natural to him, a second nature so to speak. I predict he will be able to warg into any animal as easy as you are able to read. If developed correctly, it will be a great asset to him. If I am right about this, he could turn an entire pack of wolves to do his bidding simply by controlling the leader of a pack of wolves. No average warg can enter the mind of such a strong animal never mind taking over complete control. Most wargs will only be able to do this to lesser animals. Jon’s warg abilities will potentially surpass them all.”

“That is what I mean when I call Jon being fostered by us here at Greywater Watch an unexpected windfall”, Lord Reed concluded.

Ser Gerold had yet to speak a word. If Lord Reed spoke true, then they would have their task cut out for them. How could you protect a boy that was able to play pranks on them with the help of animals?

‘Best teach him to be respectful toward his protectors and teachers’, Ser Gerold noted to himself. ‘We’re all lucky Jon is such a good-natured child. Hells, the Seven Kingdoms are lucky.’

Aloud he only bid them “Do be careful with the boy though, magic is all good and well but do not take risks with his mental health. We have to keep him safe. Bear in mind that Targaryens have a tendency to develop madness. Personally I’m quite certain it won’t affect Jon, but if you start messing with his mind.”

“We will proceed slowly, you have my word”, Lord Reed promised

Everyone took a moment to contemplate all they had discussed. Just when it seemed that the topic was closed for now, Benjen spoke up once more. He still had one major concern.

“Reed, the person, uh greenseer who will be working with my nephew, won’t he learn of the true heritage of Jon because of his uh green dreams? Won’t you have to ask permission for this from Ned Stark? He will want to know of another person working so closely with Jon and being in the know.”

“The greenseer is me, Stark. You trust me, I hope?”

Benjen and Ser Gerold could only nod their heads. They were flabbergasted.
A heavy silence fell upon the room once more.

Several minutes later Benjen made an effort to lighten the mood. “Well”, he asked, “and what genius plan would the Sword of the Morning be carrying out at the moment?”

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Later that same evening:

Benjen rested his head on the furs he had shaped into some semblance of a cushion to support his head. He contemplated all he had learned about Jon today. Benjen only ever called him Jon as opposed to his birth name Aegon which was kept a secret for obvious safety reasons. When the time came that King Aegon would stake his claim, Benjen knew he would have difficulty to adapt to the other moniker.

Whether you called him Jon or Aegon, the little boy was the focus of his life now. The last thing he had left of his sister. Benjen had taken over part of Ned’s task to protect him. He had sworn himself into the service of his nephew, the future king of Westeros. For now however, he was an honorary uncle to the child, an alleged war friend of Jon’s deceased father who checked in on him from time to time to assure his wellbeing. At least that was his cover story as far as the rest of the world was concerned.
The first time Benjen had seen Jon was at the Driftmark when Jon was hardly two moons old. He had helped Jon get settled in with the elderly couple, Edric Celtigar and his wife formerly of house Velaryon. Jon’s alleged grandparents had been members of a small branch from house Celtigar who had emigrated from Claw Isle to the Driftmark when Edric, a second son, had fallen in love with a lady Valeryon, cousin to the ruling Lord of the Driftmark.

Nobody even suspected anything was off about their cover story, not even when the three war buddies seemed to settle into a small cottage near to the main house. It was rumoured that one of them surely was enamoured with the baby’s nurse but since they had proceeded to make themselves useful with small tasks and provided protection to the community, the neighbourhood got used to having them around and life went on as usual.

Jon had been a delightful baby. At first glance Benjen had seen that he truly was Lyanna’s son. As he had described to Ned, Jon had the Stark look not to mention Lyanna’s vibrant energy. One time though Benjen could have sworn he saw hints of purple appear in the little baby’s eyes when he tickled him and Jon had cooed. Benjen’s first visit hadn’t lasted long but his heart had surrendered. This little guy was part of his pack now, the most important member actually. He would find a way to be in his life.

Ned came up with the perfect solution. Benjen Stark was officially named the liaison between the Warden of the North and the Night’s watch. He would supervise that the Watch received the support they were due from each of the Seven Kingdoms. This would mean a lot of travelling and negotiating with the important houses of each Kingdom. He would enforce the timely payment of taxes all great houses were owed to the Wall. This meant he was able to journey across Westeros on a regular basis and could relay messages to their partners in ‘crime’ without arousing suspicion. And if his boat happened to stop often at the Driftmark to provision, nobody suspected anything. Captains often had an ongoing trade deal with the Driftmark.

So Benjen Stark had been able to see Jon grow up. He had visited the Driftmark at least four times a year during Jon’s first four years of his life. A close bond had developed between the two of them. He knew Ned envied him this. Benjen looked forward to spending the rest of the week with Jon. He would worry about this warg thing later. According to Lord Reed it would be an ability that would take some time to develop. He still had time to consult with Ned and Maester Luwin. Perhaps he could even ask old Nan to repeat her old stories to him when he would be back at Winterfell. He should make sure Robb heard them as well.

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Interlude 2: Brother, oh brother

Somewhere in the Westerlands, some time ago

“Fuck off”, Sandor Clegane grumbled, his tired eyes never wavered from his pint. He had been minding his own fucking business. His habitual drinking companions had left only minutes before and he had been about to finish his ale and leave as well until those cunts had approached his table.

The three men standing before him took his curse in stride. It had been easy to track him down. Everyone in these lands knew of Sandor Clegane. The smallfolk they encountered in the Westerlands had been willing enough to tell them of the Hound’s habitual haunts, this shabby little tavern not far from where he lived being the principal one.
“Let us introduce ourselves, Ser. Perhaps buy you another round?” the man in the middle proposed politely.

“‘I’m no Ser’, he grumbled. State your damn business and be off with you lot”. Sandor still hadn’t looked up.

The men took that as enough of an invitation and seated themselves at Sandor’s table. The Hound finally deigned to look them. All three seemed to be seasoned fighters. ‘Best stay alert’. He tried to lift the alcoholic haze from his mind. ‘Them assholes look like a dangerous lot. Better hear ‘m out and be done with them.’

“I need no more piss water. Stop wasting my bloody time and talk.”

The same person spoke again. “I am Benjen Stark of Winterfell. These are my travelling companions Lord Umber of the Last Hearth and Ozzy Waters. We have some business you might be interested in so to speak.”

Sandor more attentive now, scrutinized the three men. His gaze lingered on the one that had been introduced last.

“Don’t play games with me”, he scoffed. I can sniff out a run off Kingsguard from a mile away.”

This last part fortunately had been whispered. “You have two minutes to explain you’re sorry asses”, he continued, his voice at a normal volume once more.

“Perhaps we can talk somewhere more discreet?” Stark was clearly the leader of this pack.

Sandor rose. “Was planning on leaving this godforsaken place anyway. You dumb cunts better follow me.” He tossed some coins on the table and hurried out of the tavern with large strides making it look like he did not care whether they were following him out or not.

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Half an hour later the small group were once more seated around a table, this time in the small cottage Sandor usually stayed in, at least when he was not roaming the kingdoms earning money by entering tournaments or selling his sword for small periods of time. He had declined Lord Tywin Lannister’s offer to serve in his houseguard. His brother might follow orders to kill children without blinking his eyes. Sandor would make damn sure no one he lent his services to would ever ask such a dishonourable thing of him.

Stark took the floor once more. “We’ve come to talk about your brother.”

Sandor’s interest had already been raised when he recognized Ser Oswell Whent, now it reached new heights. He fought to keep his face in a disagreeable scowl not wanting to give anything away. “What do you want with that whoreson who struts around Kingslanding as if he fucking owns it.”

“Well”, Umber couldn’t help but remark, “if he is the son of a whore, then you …”

Stark held up his hand. “If you don’t have anything of sense to contribute, hold your tongue Groaton.”

He turned his attention back to Sandor. “We are planning to bring down your brother and kindly offer you to take centre stage, knowing full well you would be for ever sorry to have missed out on this. We’re here to do you a favour actually.”

They had him, hook, line and sinker.

When Sandor was still a young boy, Gregor Clegane, nicknamed "the Mountain", his monstrously huge elder brother and arguably the most feared man in Westeros now, had nearly burned off half of Sandor's face because he had found Sandor playing with a toy that Gregor had discarded. Sandor
hadn’t even stolen it, he had merely been playing with it and had assumed he hadn’t needed Gregor's permission. Without warning or uttering a word, however, Gregor had grabbed Sandor and had "punished" him by holding his head into a burning brazier. Gregor had only been forced to stop after half a dozen servants managed to pry him away from his brother. The incident left severe burn scars over the right half of Sandor's face. Sandor had taken to wearing his hair long on that side to cover them.

That sadistic twat had even been knighted and made a brother of the Kingsguard. King Robert had rewarded Gregor Clegane for the viciously killing of Rhaegar’s two children by Elia Martell: their daughter Rhaenys and baby Aegon. He had killed baby Aegon by bashing his head against the wall, and then while still covered in the gore from her children had proceeded to viciously rape Elia, after which he killed her. It was high time for his brother to be punished.

He sat up straight abandoning all pretence of not wanting their company and encouraged Stark to unfold his plan. It was genius. The only drawback being that he wouldn’t be the one to finish his shitass brother off. ‘

‘Well, that’s for the best really’, he mused, ‘ wouldn’t want to be called “a kinslayer” for the rest of my life. At least they promised me I still get to rough him up and tell that sadistic prick to his face that his little brother has finally come for him.’

Sandor had needed no further persuading. He was on board. He would help them meet his brother somewhere in Fleabottom. Together they would lure him into a secluded spot somewhere close to the docks by dangling the promise of very young fresh whores in front of him. There they would ply him with drugs. That part of the plan would be a piece of cake. His dumb fool of a brother would never see it coming. The hardest part would be to get the big heavy cunt on board of the ship they had commissioned without alerting anyone. It seemed the three men had taken all kind of precautions to keep the little birds and other spies out of the loop.

Sandor was no dumbass. He had an inkling something was up. ‘But hey, anyone who hated his brother and wanted him dead was his no enemy of his.’ He would keep his eyes and ears open. See if he could learn whether these three were planning other things. He should try to find out what motivated these three. Ser Oswell Whent’s collaboration he could get. But a Stark leading this mission and tagging another Northern lord along with him was suspicious to say the least. These certainly were interesting times.

His thoughts circled back to the mission at hand. He couldn’t wait to see the look on his brother’s face when he realized that he would be shipped of to Dorne. Hells he couldn’t wait to hear how Dorne would make the son of a bitch suffer.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we will go back to Winterfell.
Also, Ser Arthur is on a quest.
The pack grows

Chapter Summary

Sansa is born and Ser Arthur is on a quest.

Chapter Notes

The main chapters are mostly ordered chronologically, although the events in this chapter occur a year before Benjen’s visit to Greywater Watch. The interludes on the other hand can be past, present or future snippets of the story. I’ve given my muse free reign with them.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Winterfell, a year earlier.

The morning light streamed through the windows of their bedroom. Ned tried to get up without disturbing his wife. Gods knew she needed her sleep. She looked tired all the time, even this morning after a full night’s sleep she still had dark circles under her eyes. The tented covers clearly showed the shape of her body, heavy with their second child. He stumbled around the room to gather his clothes so he could leave and go dress himself in his own chambers.

He was almost ready and sat back down on his own bed to put his boots on. A small smile ghosted over his face. He had hardly used his own room for sleeping since they had arrived at Winterfell as husband and wife. Even during the days of her moonblood they slept side by side, occasionally indulging in other ways of satisfying each other.

He knew he had subtly manipulated her at the beginning. He had played on her sense of duty to ease her into life in the North, into her role as Lady of Winterfell, into her role as his lover. He had succeeded. In the safe environment of their private chambers slowly but surely a loving wife had emerged.

Once they were left alone for the night, she let down her mask of proud, stern lady of his household and a passionate lover appeared. Even better, she became his rock. Not only had he found the willing body he had craved for since his own had become aware of the allure of women, he had also found an intelligent adviser and a trusted, caring partner to organize his keep and to raise his child with.

Soon the right term would be children. Yes, his marriage had turned out all right. Well at least mostly. Sometimes Ned had to use his autocratic tone of Warden of the North and put his foot down, mainly when it concerned Robb. Catelyn was rather overprotective. She was upset by each bruise he obtained while playing outside with the servant's children. She had been strongly against Ned’s order to start his riding lessons or his formal fight training at what she called ‘such a tender age’. If he would let her have her way, Robb would always be neatly dressed up as a little lord, hardly allowed to move, always being kept closely by her side. The only thing she approved of was his lessons with Maester Luwin.
Their last big fight had been just a few days ago. It had started out innocent enough. They were discussing the lesson plan that Maester Luwin had drafted for their son’s education. His wife had been seated with her feet propped up on a footstool, leaning into him, the both of them installed on the large coach in her sitting room. The blazing hearth made the scene even cosier.

“Calculus, reading lessons, writing lessons, the great houses of Westeros, geography”, she paused looking up from the list into Ned’s eyes. “Quite an impressive list for such a young child”, she remarked. “And there is still more, let me continue: key words of the Old Tongue, High Valerian”, she stopped once more.”

“High Valerian, Ned? Whatever will he need that for?”

“Well Cat, as you know someday ‘Winter is coming’. So to state one reason: for the North to survive, we will need to increase our trade agreements with Essos. It is always better to understand your counterpart during negotiations. It is even better when they are not aware of it. It has helped me several times in the past not to mention how my younger brother has been able to get himself out of a few scrapes in Essos. One time especially when he could overhear two men discussing how they were going to rob him as soon as he had retired for the night. They had clearly recognized him as a traveller of some means who was staying at the tavern. They didn’t quite speak High Valerian, but he could make out enough words from the dialect they were using to foil their plans.”

“Anyhow, I have always thought that gathering knowledge is not only about its practical usefulness. It is a way to train the mind, to get a broader understanding of the world in its entirety, a way of developing yourself.” He paused and smiled indulgently at her. “I’m sorry. I am getting carried away. Please read on, what’s next on this list?”

“I’m almost at the end. Maester Luwin suggests that we would perhaps want to teach him about the Gods ourselves.” Catelyn looked thoughtful and proposed: “Well luckily you have built a little Sept at my request. I can start to take him with me a few times a week and tell him all about the Seven-Pointed Star. Soon he will be able to pray alongside me.” She kept her expression neutral but held her breath waiting for Ned’s reaction.

Ned frowned, tilted his head at her and was visibly searching for the right words. “Catelyn”, he started, trying to stay calm and speak slowly in order to make her hear every single word he would speak to her, “Robb is a son of the North. One day, if all goes well, he will be the most powerful man in this Kingdom. His men must be loyal to him, respect him, understand him, must be able to see him as a true Northerner, as one of them.” He kept his eyes firmly locked on hers. “We Northerners, and that includes me rather prominently make no mistake, we believe that the only Gods who have any power here in our beloved North are the old Gods. Your so called new Gods are the Gods of the Andals. As you know we are no Andals. We are of the First Men and proud to be so.”

Although he saw Catelyn grow tense and noticed the colour rise in her check he continued his discourse. “Robb will grow up with the Old Gods, pray in the Godswood, he will be married there as well. It is very likely he will marry a lady from a prominent Northern house. You can teach him about the Seven so he can understand the ways of the other Kingdoms but it will never be his religion.”

Catelyn had withdrawn herself as far as the couch would allow. Although her eyes were teary, there was a hint of steel in them when she countered. “He is my son too, Ned. I will not let him grow up as a savage. My family will never understand. They will not respect him. It was difficult enough that I had to marry…”. She was stopped by the thunderous expression on her husband’s face as he interrupted her.
“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, wife!” he yelled seeing he would not succeed in his plan to gently ease her into agreeing to adhere to his point of view. He imposed his authority on her. “I am your Lord and husband, woman. You will obey me in this. This is no discussion. I am telling you, Robb will worship the old Gods.” His last sentence was uttered with a significant pause between each word to further emphasize his edict. After finishing his diatribe he stood up and left the room abruptly not giving her any chance to object.

Two days of stony silence had ensued. Well, it hadn’t helped that this particular topic had come up precisely when she was in the last stages of her pregnancy. Maester Luwin had tried to act as a peacemaker. He had patiently explained to his Lord that pregnant woman could be a bit irrational at times. Since Ned hadn’t been present during her first pregnancy he hadn’t witnessed the mood swings that had plagued her then, the Maester had added. He had also reassured Ned that although Catelyn kept to her bedroom and wouldn’t see him, her health was fine and her pregnancy was posing no problems. What Maester Luwin had used as arguments to soften Catelyn’s attitude toward her husband, he knew not.

In the end they had found a kind of fragile compromise; although Ned wouldn’t dare to tell his wife that he considered it a victory. Robb would grow up with the Old Gods. However, if they had any daughters in the future, they would be instructed in both religions and would be able to make their own mind up once they were old enough to decide for themselves.

Slowly the atmosphere at Winterfell ameliorated and their interactions grew affectionate once more. Fortunately for him, she would deliver in a few days and he wouldn’t have an irrational pregnant wife any longer. He decided to go to the Godswood and pray for a safe delivery and a healthy child.

The Godswood was peaceful as always. Ned loved it here. This was the place where he could get his thoughts together and focus on his problems. He had learned to tackle his issues one at a time. It was often the only way to stay sane. He would mentally picture his mind as this storage space with lots of tiny separate boxes. Then he would proceed to put every problem in a separate box. That way he could mentally take out the most pressing issue and no matter how complicated it had seemed before, with his entire mind focussed on this one difficulty, he was able to come to an acceptable solution most of the time. Then he could open another ‘box’ and concentrate on the next issue.

And the Gods knew he had his fair share of burdens. As if having become Warden of the North without being groomed for it wasn’t enough of a burden onto itself, he was also responsible for the wellbeing of the largest of the seven Kingdoms, a kingdom with the harshest environment of all. It was not easy to keep his people fed and out of trouble. The Northern Lords were a proud and stubborn lot. The only reason he was able to keep them in line was because of their unwavering loyalty to House Stark.

The Starks had ruled the North for thousands of years, first as the Kings of Winter and for the last three hundred years or so as Wardens of the North and faithful subjects of the Targaryen Dynasty. The Rebellion had changed this status quo. Well, not for long, if Ned had anything to say.

For the moment Robert Baratheon was King of the Seven Kingdoms. Once Robert had been his best friend, he had even been closer to Robert than to his elder brother Brandon. Ned and Robert had grown up together for a few years, both being fostered at the Vale under the care of Jon Arryn. They were thick as thieves then and got in all kinds of trouble together but would always stand up for each other. Either they both got away with it or they were both punished. How times had changed.

Somehow his life had taken an unexpected turn. For some reason the Gods had made him the main
instigator of a conspiracy to overthrow Robert’s rule. ‘Ironic really’, he thought. ‘I am a Stark, famous for the Stark honour. Robert will never see it coming.’

Ned kneeled in front of the hear tree. ‘Why me?’ he implored the Gods. “Why did you Gods put this burden on my shoulders?”

The Gods remained eerily silent. Nevertheless, Ned felt his mind calm down. He could focus once more. Ned knew his course was set. He knew he was doing the right thing. There was no doubt. The envisioned endgame was the only true course!

Besides Robert could only blame himself for loosing Ned’s support. Robert had doomed his rule himself. And that only minutes after claiming the throne.

Ned still had a hard time believing his erstwhile friend capable of relishing in the brutal murder of innocent children. Robert had waved aside Ned’s protestations and refused to consider retaliations for the monsters who had taken it upon themselves to murder these children and their mother before Ned and Robert could reach the throne room.

No, Robert had done even worse. He had thanked them and raised their status. The Mountain became a trusted knight and Tywin Lannister became father in law to the King. Robert had married Cersei Lannister and much of the Lannister gold with it. Ned had left the capital, disgusted, disillusioned and disappointed. He had evaded King Robert's invitations ever since, stating his office of Warden of the North as an excuse.

He told himself to stop reminiscing. The only thing he wished for was for someone to reassure him that the way they were trying to achieve their goal was the best one. Someone who could confirm that the plans they were devising were the best way to prevent as much bloodshed as possible when the time was upon them.

At least it helped some that he could talk these things through with Catelyn now. At first he had kept everything from Catelyn, only Maester Luwin and Benjen knowing of the existence of Jon. But gradually Catelyn had become more a Stark than a Tully. She was fiercely loyal to her new family here in the north. And slowly Ned had begun to trust his wife with more delicate matters. And then one night when he had been deeply troubled over a report from the Driftmark, Lyanna’s secret poured out of him. At first Catelyn had had trouble believing that Lyanna wasn’t kidnapped and raped, but had willingly eloped with the married crown prince. But as Ned started to elaborate she had taken it all in stride. Well, at least since she had learned of the annulment and the second marriage. She had relented once she had realized Jon was a trueborn prince.

Of course she always insisted on taking every precaution possible for the safety of their family but she had become a soundboard. He could test his theories on her, gauge her reaction and work from there. Catelyn had become a co-conspirator. ‘At least when it is not a religious issue’, he chuckled.

Ned bowed his head and prayed once more to receive guidance from the Gods. Feeling lighter he went back inside and entered his solar, determined to start to work on the next steps now that his mind was calmer. He seated himself behind his desk.

‘How best to go forward? I must contact Howland and see if he knows of another couple at the Driftmark who can take Jon in, should Edric Velaryon succumb to his illness. I would like to go myself this time and see the boy but I cannot be missed here at the moment. Perhaps it is also better no to risk it yet. Better to send Benjen on official business to Greywater Watch. And I must send for …’

“My Lord”, the handmaid of Lady Catelyn stumbled in his solar unannounced interrupting his solitary reflections. She seemed out of breath and Ned knew immediately something was the matter with his wife.

“Catelyn?” he asked standing abruptly already on his way to the door.
"Her waters have broken, My Lord. Your child will be born soon! But you can not go to her now, My Lord!" She blocked the doorway. "Best stay here and let the women handle this."
She looked a bit anxious realizing she had just given orders to her Lord. "If you don’t mind me saying so, that is. I will inform you as soon as there is more news to relay, My Lord."

Ned sat down again and nodded. The handmaid left immediately. A few minutes later he quit the room in search of company. It served no purpose staying in his solar. He wasn’t able to concentrate any longer.

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In the great hall, Benjen and Rodrik Cassel, his master at arms, were trying to keep Lord Stark calm. Benjen was a bit out of his depth here but showed his solidarity by his continuing presence. Cassel offered more substantial help. He had successfully stopped Ned’s pacing. He had gotten him to sit down and had provided ale for the three of them. Then he had tried to distract Ned with some amusing anecdotes of previous child births in his family. Of course he stuck to the more positive aspects and talked mostly of the adorable antics of the babies.

After what seemed like days of waiting to Ned but actually it only had been a few hours, the handmaid arrived with a small bundle in her hands.
"Congratulations my Lord, you have a daughter."

Ned couldn’t stop the smile from spreading over his face. "And my wife", he enquired, "Is she all right? How soon can she receive company?"
"She is resting now my Lord. The birth was not all that difficult but still it asks a lot of a woman’s body. I will let you know when she awakes."
She carefully handed the tiny girl over to her father.

Ned was awed. The first time he had seen Robb, the boy had already been several moons old. His new daughter however was tiny. Robb had been a giant compared to her. She almost disappeared inside his arms. He had to readjust her in order to be able to see the little face and did so with trepidation. She looked so frail. However the baby hardly reacted to his manhandling. She was lovely to behold. There were already tusks of red hair visible on her little head. Benjen and Rodrik both strained to catch a peek of her.

"Congratulations big brother. I predict she will be a beauty when she grows up. In a few years, you will have to use all your cunning to keep the suitors at bay. Not to mention all the ravens you will receive from the great houses petitioning for marriage alliances.” Benjen grinned at his brother.
"Better you than me."
His face turned more serious. "I am glad Catelyn is ok though."

"Me too, brother, without a doubt, me too.” Ned still beamed, his eyes never wavering from his daughter’s face. It had taken him some time to get Catelyn with child again. Robb would be celebrating his fourth name day in a few days. Catelyn had suffered a miscarriage two year ago, so this little one was truly very welcome. He focussed on the bundle in his arms again, starting to feel a suspicious moist sensation on his forearm. He decided to walk towards the nursery in search of female assistance. In the corridor he motioned a guard to come closer and instructed him to go and fetch Robb. “Tell my son to come in and clean himself up. Then he should report to the nursery”, he ordered the guard whose eyes were drawn to the little bundle in his Lord’s arms.
“Of course, My Lord. I will send the little Lord up straight away. And congratulations My Lord!”
the guard said deferentially tearing his eyes away from the sight of the cute baby and hurried in the direction of the courtyard.

Ned resumed his trip to the nursery. He looked forward to introducing his son and daughter to each
The next day Lord Stark summoned Maester Luwin to his solar. He felt on top of things again. It was time to throw himself back into his duties.

“Good morning Maester, I need you to prepare messages to the Lords of the North.” Ned started the conversation before the Maester could close the door. “We can announce the birth of my daughter but use the opportunity to add extra info in the scrolls. I want to arrange a meeting. It’s high time we reconvene to check on the different stages of our reinforcement efforts and plan for the next steps. In the message destined for Ironrath ask Gregor Forrester whether he is prepared to host the meeting this time. Do not forget to ask Lord Manderly to send a messenger out to contact Lord Reed at Greywater Watch immediately. Reed should at least send a representative to our meeting if he cannot come himself.”

“I will get right on to it, my Lord.”, Luwin bowed and started to leave the room before reconsidering. “I presume we will send out messages to the Red Keep and The Vale as well? The message to the Tullys has already been sent as requested.”

“Yes send a message to the Vale but only with the news that I have a daughter and she and my wife are healthy. As for a message to King Robert, I don’t know.” Ned frowned, his good mood having all but left him.

“I suppose it can not be helped.” Ned sighed. “I only fear it will result in another invitation to come to Kingslanding. I am running out of excuses to turn King Robert down with, so as not to cause a permanent rift. I worry that if I keep refusing his invitations, one day the King will turn up at Winterfell without notice.”

Ned went over to the window and looked down at his son who was playing outside with some wooden toys, not a care in the world. He addressed Maester Luwin once more. “Yes, do send out a raven to the Red Keep but keep it formal and as brief as possible. Best send out ravens to a representative of each of the Kingdoms as well. You know, The Martells, The Tyrells, Renly and Stannis Baratheon, … You know better than me. It is not necessary to send one to Pyke. Thank you Maester.”

Robb was still playing in the courtyard but had spotted his father. He smiled at his father waving with great enthusiasm. Ned waved back and turned away from the window, his spirits lifting once more. ‘Time to tackle the agenda for the coming meeting and I must not forget to look in on my wife and daughter.’ Ned sat back down at his desk and started to study the drawings of the harbour expansions.

Interlude3: Summerhall

Somewhere in the Stormlands.

“Gods it was hot”. Years living on an island where there was always at least a refreshing breeze had made him forget how much heat a blistering sun could generate in the middle of the day this far inland, this far south. Ser Arthur mopped his brow for what seemed like the thousandth time. He was alone, but somehow that was a nice change. For once he didn’t bare the responsibility for someone’s life, for the life of someone of humongous importance.

Four years ago at the Tower of Joy the three of them had unanimously decided to withdraw from
public life in the Seven Kingdoms and to dedicate themselves solely to protect the new-born King and help him reclaim his throne when he was old enough to stake his claim. They had been prepared to do anything necessary, even ally themselves with the Starks. It had been a calculated gamble. Ser Gerold had been steadfast in his belief that for Eddard Stark family meant everything. ‘Wolves protected their pack at all cost. And the baby is his family’, Gerold had argued.

And he had been right. Hells, Lord Stark had instantly hurried to the far south of the Seven Kingdoms upon receipt of a vague anonymous message the three of them had decided to send him, revealing the area where his sister could be found. It had been easy for Ser Gerold to covertly approach him and unite him with Lyanna. Ser Gerold still relished in narrating every detail of how he had confronted Lord Stark that night.

Lord Stark and Howland Reed hadn’t recognised Ser Gerold Hightower at first. Well it was dark and he had disguised himself. But still, afterwards Lord Stark had told Ser Arthur he still couldn’t fathom why he hadn’t known straight away who had accosted him that night near the stables of that inn in Dorne. Upon learning that Ser Gerold could guide them to his sister who was very ill, but that discretion was paramount, Ned Stark and Howland Reed had agreed to follow him to the Tower of Joy forthwith without alerting the rest of their travelling party who where resting at the inn unaware they had been temporarily abandoned by there liege lord.

It had been a heartbreaking scene that greeted Ser Arthur when he had left his post and had set foot in the room a few minutes after granting entrance to the two Northerners. Ned Stark was sitting on his knees next to her bed. A feverish Lyanna although hardly conscious seemed to recognize her brother. She had taken his hand and had beseeched him with her last few breaths to protect her new-born son. Ned had been devastated and bewildered. His eyes had found the wet nurse who stood in the corner with a small baby in her hands and was sobbing quietly. Then he saw the blood staining the furs. Unable to utter a single word, he had desperately held her small hands in his and had silently nodded to his sister so she would understand he promised to do as she requested.

It seemed that Lyanna had successfully staved off death until she could see her son safely cared for by family. Her last words were spoken so softly that Ned had to lean over and put his ear to her mouth to be able to hear them: “His name is Aegon, Aegon Targaryn”. And Lyanna had released her last breath.

Ser Arthur still recalled the heated debate that ensued later in a room at ground level before reaching a consensus everybody could live with.

Lord Stark had been adamant. The boy belonged with him. He would bring him to Winterfell and proclaim him his son. He would forsake his honour and admit he had betrayed his wife and sired a bastard during the war. His nephew would grow up alongside his true children. Aegon wouldn’t want for anything.

The three Kingsguard had been appalled. Their King growing up with the stigma of a bastard hanging over his head, unacceptable! Furthermore, they could not let him go anywhere without them. They were sworn to protect him. And if they followed him to Winterfell anyone who had a lick of sense would immediately put two and two together. Aegon and everyone who had helped hide him would be in mortal danger. King Robert’s hate for Targaryens was outrageous.

They seemed at an impasse. Several possibilities were suggested and rejected out of hand, the free cities with the other Targaryens being one of them. But all of a sudden, Howland Reed who had stayed out of the discussion until then had offered a possible solution. After some tweaking, a plan was agreed upon and the rest was history. Howland Reed had accompanied them on their journey to
the Driftmark. Ned Stark had reluctantly left his nephew in their hands and had returned to the inn. The next morning he would pick up Lyanna’s body with his entire entourage and bring his sister back to Winterfell to be buried in the crypts of her ancestral home.

And in one fell swoop, Ser Arthur’s life had changed immeasurably. One day he was a famous Kingsguard, acclaimed to be the best swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms bearing the honourable title of “Sword of the Morning”, the next day he was forced to live under an assumed name disguised as a modest war veteran on a small island trying to keep a low profile not daring to reach out to his family who were mourning his loss.

Almost five years he had been living like that now, first in the Driftmark and recently at Greywater Watch in the Neck. But Ser Arthur didn’t regret the choices they had made that fateful day. Quite the opposite really. He had come to love the little boy-King and was convinced that he could become an excellent ruler with the right guidance. The boy had his heart in the right place, could already reign in his temper most of the time and showed intelligence beyond his years. Yes, he was prepared to make any sacrifice necessary to do right by his true King.

Ser Arthur’s stopped his reminiscing. He had arrived. The ruins of Summerhall were before him.

‘Let’s see if Lord Reed is right about this and I haven’t come all this way on a wild goose chase.’ Another benefit of allying themselves with the North had been the strange premonitions of Lord Reed. He called himself a ‘greenseer’. Ser Arthur wasn’t at all sure he understood entirely what that entailed, but he knew that Lord Reed had been instrumental in thwarting the little birds and spies until now. His warnings had helped them escape detection on several occasions. ‘Well let’s hope his so-called vision of the eggs also proves true.’ Ser Arthur was sent on this mission solo since discretion was of the utmost importance. Lord Reed had dreamt that the three dragon eggs were still somewhere at Summerhall. He had explained that in his dreams he had seen the eggs lying somewhere in a kind of cave beneath the ruins. He had even claimed that at the time of the dream he had felt a premonition that the eggs were somehow destined for Aegon.

‘It could make sense that the eggs are still here. I know of rumours that the fired that destroyed Summerhall had been caused by an attempt to hatch the dragon eggs. Perhaps the floor collapsed and the eggs disappeared beneath it? Nobody lived to tell the tale.’ Arthur pondered. He entered the ruins ready to start his search.

He had been searching for a day an a half and had been over every nook and cranny of these damn caves twice. He was about to give up when suddenly a ray of sunlight shone through a crack in the cave wall and showed him the way to an alcove he had missed when he had inspected that corner twice before. Ser Arthur felt a sense of calm enveloping him. It suddenly felt as if the Gods were guiding him, that he was meant to succeed in this quest. And lo and behold, there they were. He kneeled in front of the alcove and marvelled at the sight before him. Three eggs sparkled in the sunlight. Each one was unique in its own beauty. One egg was a blend of shades of green, the middle one was silvery and the last one was a shiny black.

Ser Arthur remained kneeling in front of the eggs for quite some time. He couldn’t believe it. How had these eggs not been discovered before? They were probably some of the most important artefacts in the Seven Kingdoms.

Finally he emerged from his stupor and very delicately removed the eggs from their hiding place. Now the only thing he needed to do was to get them safely to Greywater Watch without anyone finding out where he had been and what he was he carrying. ‘A piece of cake compared to what I’ve faced before, at least I hope it will be.’
Next chapter: conspiracy meetings and an interlude in Kingslanding
Conspiring

Chapter Summary

Several meetings of our co-conspirators take place at Greywater watch, a few moons after the Greyjoy Rebellion.
We get a glimpse of Kingslanding.

Chapter Notes

The main chapter makes a time jump. I am eager to arrive at the point in my story where I can get Jon to actively take part and become the leader of this band of conspirators.
I hope you do not find long meetings boring. These men have a lot to discuss.
The interlude will be a flash back.

This is my longest chapter yet. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Greywater Watch, Lord Reed’s solar

Lord Reed watched them enter his solar one by one: Benjen, Ser Arthur, Ser Gerold, Lord Manderly, and Ned Stark. Ned was the last one to sit down. Howland could clearly see the contentment on Ned’s face. Ned had spent the day with Jon, taking in every part of his nephew’s daily schedule and had closely observed the boy’s interactions with his teachers, the servants and the visitors. To Howland it had been obvious. Lord Stark had not only been evaluating the progress of Jon’s education, he had also been trying to make out Jon’s character and determining his social skills. Apparently he was more than satisfied with the outcome.

The chairs were arranged in a small circle. It was done deliberately to encourage all participants to take an active part in the meeting. The servants quickly provided everyone with refreshments and closed the doors. Lord Reed as their host at Greywater Watch would direct the meeting.
“Let’s begin, shall we?” Howland opened the meeting.
“We have a lot to discuss. We will follow Lord’s Stark’s agenda for this meeting. First up is the situation in the North. Lord Stark, can you elaborate, please?”

Ned nodded his head. He turned to the two Kingsguards who were seated next to each other. “First I want to ask if I can count on you two to bring Ser Oswell up to speed? I consider it vital he also knows the status of things and agrees with any action we will decide upon during these meetings. Can you please relay to him that he can voice his opinion on anything he deems necessary? Also please task him to be present at the final meeting that will take place in two days’ time, perhaps Ser Arthur can take on guard duties then?” He looked questioningly at each of them.

Ser Gerold spoke up, “That goes without saying Lord Stark. We have no secrets between the three of us and Ser Oswell is assertive enough to find a way to voice his grievances should he have any.”
Ser Arthur smiled at the speech of his Lord Commander and nodded his assent as well. “We will
arrange it so”, he confirmed his willingness to take over guard duty from Oswell when the final meeting would take place.

Ned started his report. “First there is the shoring up of the Northern defences. All important strongholds have implemented our instructions. The larger project of rebuilding Moat Caiolin and man it is almost halfway completed. Shortly we will be able to seal off that entrance to the North effectively should the Crown declare war on us. At the moment over five hundred men are camped out there, a mixture of builders, other craftsman and soldiers. We are in the process of recruiting smallfolk willing to settle there and farm the lands around the stronghold. We expect the first families to arrive in a few moons.”

“Our eastern and western coastlines have also upped their defences. Another item we can cross of our list. We have paid extra attention to the west coast, as discussed. Although hopefully, now that the Greyjoys are soundly defeated, there will be a significant decrease in raiding partings from the Ironborn.”

“The first shipments of glass have arrived from Essos and we will begin expanding our glass gardens to grow more food. As we discussed at previous meetings, it is necessary to prepare for the possibility that we could be cut off from the South for a period of time once make we make our play. Should anyone need any more details about this, don’t hesitate to ask me, either now or later.”

Eddard Stark paused for a bit looking around but since no one spoke up he resumed his account.

“I have been able to keep our real motive hidden from the Northern Lords so far, present company excepted of course.” He smiled and Howland saw him direct a look at Lord Manderly and then Ned looked straight at him. Ned resumed is monologue. “But it has not been easy and it won’t be long before we will have to review our decision to keep it from them for another few years.”

“I know secrecy is necessary to keep Jon safe, but we must also consider that the Lords of the North could be offended to have been kept out of the loop for so long and it could compromise their support for our cause.” Ned was not done explaining his point of view. “It is not the first time that I have told you all that although they are completely loyal to me, it is not a given that they will follow me blindly in supporting a half Stark half Targaryen boy’s claim to the Iron Throne, especially if it could lead to calling the banners and possible bloodshed. But let’s table this topic for our next meeting. Let us first focus on easier topics.”

Lord Howland took up his role as moderator.

“Next up is the status of the Wildling situation at the Wall. I believe Benjen Stark is best placed to inform us of the newest developments.” Howland turned to the younger Stark brother and gestured him to take the floor.

Benjen straightened himself. He mimicked his brother’s serious tone of voice and gave an account of his last visit at the wall.

“Jeor Mormont expressed his thanks once more for our ongoing support. He relays the gratefulness of some old recruits who can tell the difference between the past compared to the last ten years. It has been a long time since The Night’s Watch has had enough financial resources and recruits coming in regularly for such a long stretch of time.”

“They have enough funds to renovate Castle Black and make a few of the long deserted castles along the Wall habitable once more. The steady influx of recruits has reached the point that they have enough men to split their forces between more watch points. Also, during my last visit I experienced first hand that the quality of the food and drink has improved considerably. The ale they served me even tasted like ale. The men visibly dress better and look cleaner now.” Benjen’s discourse lightened the mood visibly since smiles appeared for the first time since the meeting had started.
“However scouts keep reporting large Wildling tribes migrating from the higher North to settlements closer to the wall. Mormont is monitoring the situation closely. A little bit over two moons ago a party of twelve Wildlings made it across the wall and created a lot of havoc before they were halted. I can assure you, it takes a lot of balls to climb an ice structure of 700 feet tall. I can’t fathom that stealing a few pieces of cattle and harassing our people is enough of a motivation to endanger your life like that. It raises questions.”

“I suggested sending someone beyond the wall to infiltrate the Wildings and live among them for a time to find out whatever motivates this significant change in their behaviour. However, the Lord Commander rejected my idea. He argued that it is too dangerous and that the situation is not dire enough to order a valuable ranger into such a life threatening situation.” Benjen took a breath and looked at his brother. “A good argument, I must admit. Besides, he is the one calling the shots at the wall. We can only offer our support?”

“He’s right.” His brother offered. “The Wildlings beyond the Wall are the responsibility of the Night’s Watch. However”, his voice took on authority. “If the Lord Commander cannot keep them contained and they reach our lands then it is our North and my people that will be in danger. The people of the North are my responsibility. And if the Wildlings continue to successfully scale the Wall, I will be obligated to interfere and Jeor Mormont will have to relent and coordinate with us.” He looked at everyone present to gauge their reaction and continued.

“That’s why I propose to keep up the regular visits of my brother, Benjen Stark to the Night’s Watch. We need to keep a close eye on this. Besides we require access to Maester Aemon. He has already been instrumental in providing guidance to Jon and we will need his counsel even more in the future. Maester Aemon still keeps some ‘Targaryen secrets’ he will only divulge to a Targaryen in person. But that’s a topic for another time.” He deflected.

“If you can all agree that this is the only immediate action we can take and find it sufficient for the time being, we can move on to the next topic, namely the building of a naval fleet to support our future king.”

“Lord Manderly?” Howland directed everyone’s attention to the Northern Lord who had been silent so far. “Can you give a status report, please?”

Lord Manderly seemed to grow in size. He cleared his throat and looked around making sure he had everyone’s attention.

“As you all know, the future royal fleet is being built at separate locations to avoid detection. At White Harbour a hundred new ships are ready and twenty more are under construction. Our most pressing problem is finding adequate crewmen. The North has never had much of a fleet and sailing is not in our blood. So any input you have to solve this issue is welcome. But first let me tell you what has been happening at the other locations.”

“The Skagosi have also been busy. That small community has almost finished building fifty ships. Bear Island, as predicted was most adamant to help as well. They have already twenty ships to lend to our cause, and five more under construction. Word from Riverrun told me that they support the North by donating fifty ships, complete with crew. We will only have to bear the cost of their wages. I guess we have to thank Lady Catelyn for her influence here.” Lord Manderly smiled at his liege Lord. “There is however the practical problem of getting them moved from Seagard past the Ironborn.”

Ser Gerold held up his hand. “If I may speak?” Lord Manderly paused and gestured him to continue. “It would be a strategic advantage to have some ships at that particular coastline. We will need to defend that part of the Seven Kingdoms as well. The Ironborn are still a threat. Not on a large scale
but their guerrilla styled attacks can create enough of a nuisance. I would suggest to take command of them but to use them on location, at least for the time being. It is still unclear how our forces will have to be deployed when our King stakes his claim. It will also help persuade the smallfolk when it is revealed that the True King has been protecting their shores for some time and that he already cares for all his potential subjects. Perhaps we can agree to leave them there for the time being and revisit this discussion when it is more pertinent?"

Lord Manderly took over once more. “I think we can agree on that for now.” Since everyone kept silent he continued. “Let me just finish my status report. At the Driftmark another small fleet is under construction. If all goes right, by the end of the year they will have 50 ships including crew, all bought and paid for by Lord Stark’s mysterious war fund. Combined we will have almost three hundred ships at the end of the year. Not a small feat to accomplish in the North.” He smiled proudly. “Should we need more vessels in the future, I think we should consider buying some in Essos. We could keep them docked over there until we need them, so as not to arouse too much suspicion. For the time being the ships are kept in secluded parts of the harbours. As far has I have been able to ascertain, no questions are being raised and in the North, the smallfolk’s only reaction is gratefulness that there are an abundance of paid jobs for everyone. If there is talk about the new ships in the taverns, it is only to comment on how the new ships surely are going to be necessary to trade with the Reach and Essos once the seasons turn, because winter is coming.” He smiled at Lord Stark.

This time is was Ser Arthur who raised his hand. Lord Manderly made an encouraging gesture. “I think I have a suggestion for your lack of seamen. We could recruit on Dragonstone. I know for a fact that there are a lot of ex sailors now living as smallfolk on that island unhappy with their current circumstances and would be glad to be able to take up their old profession, even more so once they eventually learn they will be sailing under the flag with the three headed dragon once more. But you cannot send one of us. We would be recognized immediately. We should send someone else.” Ser Arthur finished.

Lord Stark looked over to Howland Reed and seeing him nod took over again. “Thank you Ser Arthur. That is an excellent suggestion. It also happens to bring us to the next point of our agenda: manpower. I think we ought to consider expanding our little circle. We are stretched too thin as it is and there is still a lot to be accomplished. We are not yet halfway through the items that need to be discussed and I am certain more actions will be decided upon over the next few days that will require one of us to take an active part.”

“I know that we need to tread carefully and I know that I am the one who is always arguing that it is unfair to have more people know of our future King’s secret while he himself has no inkling of who he is. However it cannot be helped, we need more helping hands. And there are things we can’t ask of people without giving proper motivation. The best example is sitting here right in front of us.” Lord Stark pointed at Lord Manderly. “I couldn’t possibly have made him Master of three hundred ships without explaining our purpose.”

“Everyone will have to be vetted and we will try to move forward only when we are unanimous in our decision. I’m going to list some candidates and you can take your time deciding. We do not need to reach a consensus today. And if you would have other suggestions, you can bring them up during one of our next meetings here.” Ned coughed. All that talking was made him thirsty. He sipped from his ale before starting his enumeration.

“First I propose we consider bringing Ser Davos Seaworth into the fold. If you recall, he was the captain on the ship who initially brought Jon from Dorne to the Driftmark nine years ago. He is a
wise and loyal man. His wife is related to Lord Reed’s wife. If we can persuade him to join us, he will be a great asset in recruiting the right persons to man our boats. Furthermore his smuggling skills can come in handy, I think I can safely say Lord Reed will vouch for him as well.”

Everyone looked at Lord Reed who nodded his head to signal his assent.

“Next, I think we could buy the services of Sandor Clegane.” Ned paused because he saw startled looks all around. “Please let me explain my motivations.” He pleaded.

“We need someone with his skills. I know he seems like a rough uncouth guy. He is also a seasoned fighter not afraid to kill if necessary, but one with his heart in the right place and fiercely protective of the weak. I think he can be persuaded to help the younger half brother of the two murdered royal children. He is one of the only ones who openly dares to object when the subject is discussed, a fact which endears him to me for obvious reasons. I am confident that with the right approach we can get him to swear himself to our cause. And once he is into the fold, we will have his unwavering loyalty. That’s the kind of man he really is. Think on that as well.”

“My third candidate is Ser Barristan Selmy. This however will require an even subtler approach. If he knew that Rhaegar’s son lived, he would want to protect him. However, he would need to break his current oath in order to do just that. He will be at a loss how to get himself out of his predicament in an honourable way and I fear he will not be able to reach a satisfying solution on his own. Here I would like your input.” Eddard Stark looked over to Ser Gerold and Ser Arthur. “You know him better than me. My suggestion would be to ease him into it. He would not need to leave Robert Baratheon’s service immediately. He could be our eyes and ears in Kingslanding at first. That way he would need not to do any direct harm to the Baratheon reign. Just bring us some information. Do you think one of you could get him to agree on that?”

Ser Arthur was deep in thought. He looked over to Ser Gerold and suggested hesitantly. “I would start with cryptic messages waking his conscience. Then one of us could meet him incognito in a tavern he frequents in Fleabottom. We can then gauge his reaction to knowing one of us is alive for a few days to see whether he will betray that information to the small council. It will give us a clue on how best to proceed next.

My guess is”, Ser Arthur exchanged another look with Ser Gerold before reiterating, “My guess is, he will need some time to really come to terms with his situation. He will lament that he was the one being stuck on the Trident and will feel remorse about his decision to swear his oath to King Robert on the spot. But in the end I am confident that he will decide to support Rhaegar’s son.” Ser Arthur and Ser Gerold were of one mind it seemed. Howland saw them exchange reassuring glances.

Lord Reed interrupted. “Lord Stark, have you considered Varys as a possible spy for us in Kingslanding? I have told you before that my premonitions seem to favour that. They tell me the argument of Jon being a better ruler for the realm, a protector of the weak would get him on board. This could free up Ser Barristan. He could disappear from Kingslanding and either join us or travel to Essos to coordinate Daenerys Targaryen’s protection. The man would be a vast deal happier.”

Lord Stark seemed to mull this over. The others also did not know if they were willing to trust Varys yet.

Lord Reed broke the stalemate. “Let’s table this for one of our last meetings this week. Just consider it a possibility.” He addressed Lord Stark. “You had more candidates?”

Ned looked relieved the subject was dropped and he could finish his own list of candidates.

“Lastly”, he spoke up, “This will be my strangest suggestion yet. We could try to contact Oberyn Martell.”

Everyone looked at Lord Stark not believing their ears. Even Howland had not seen this coming.

“Are you serious Lord Stark?” He was the first one to find his speech. The others were still staring at
the Warden of the North, their mouths wide open. “Jon is living proof of Rhaegar casting aside Elia, a reminder of the insult to their house. I thought our scheme to hand the Mountain over to them and to neutralise Tywin Lannister was to buy their neutrality in the possible coming conflict, but to reveal them our secret? That’s taking an unacceptable risk!” He exclaimed, still a bit chafed that his own suggestion had not been welcomed although they knew his premonitions had always steered them in the right direction.

The others looked uneasy but Lord Stark was not perturbed. “I am not talking of bringing Dorne into our scheme. I am talking of the Red Viper. We all know he is a rebel at heart and a free spirit as far as he can get away with it. I speculate that he will love being in on something this huge and keep it a secret from Prince Doran. I also know he hates the passive approach Doran Martell always chooses. Prince Oberyn loves to act, to bring things in motion. My guess is, he will relish the opportunity to show his brother that being impetuous can at times harvest great results. Of course, we will only allow him to inform Doran Martell when everything is about to be brought out in the open.”

“As for his possible animosity towards a child of Rhaegar with Lyanna, I trust in Jon to solve that problem. He will charm Oberyn within five minutes of meeting him. The Red Viper will not know what hit him. Besides I also put my trust in the fact that he is a sucker for lost causes. To aid another possible victim of the King that condoned butchering his kin, could have some appeal to him. Jon can’t help who his mother is and he would have been a half brother to Oberyn’s niece and nephew.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “Benjen has been informing us during previous meetings how much Prince Oberyn has been travelling these last few years as well. Dorne desperately wants to now what happened to Tywin Lannister and they still don’t know who sent them the Mountain. Well perhaps they are starting to suspect the North but they are still none the wiser as to why. I think Prince Oberyn will be glad to finally get a clue and will be amenable to keep things from his brother for now. Still, I suggest we try to get him to visit either here or at the Driftmark when Jon is visiting there.”

Lord Stark paused seemingly having found a new idea and was considering it for a moment. Then he resumed. “The Driftmark will arouse less suspicion. Perhaps plan for an extended stay there. The Celtigar widow will be glad to see her alleged grandchild once more.”

Ned quickly glanced at the two knights before addressing the next question to them. “What do you think about organising a visit to the Driftmark for Jon? Benjen could accompany you as well.” He didn’t pause to let them to respond however.

“Let’s arrange an accidental meeting between Prince Oberyn and Jon. Let the boy work his magic. When he has charmed the Prince, someone can start throwing bones at the Red Viper, subtle at first and scrutinize his reaction. Before we tell him anything vital we will ask for his word of honour. If we still have doubts, we can wait a few moons to see if he tells anyone. Only if we deem his behaviour satisfying enough, we can proceed with our plan to reveal more. At least this is my suggestion.”

Lord Manderly silently asked permission and spoke up. “We all know Prince Oberyn is fiercely loyal to Dorne. Dorne is hardly a part of the Seven Kingdoms. Why would he pick our side over Dorne?”

“We wouldn’t ask him to.” Eddard Stark immediately retorted. “We would guarantee him a political status quo for Dorne.”

Now it was Ser Gerold who made a gesture to interfere. “Are we entitled to make promises of such political importance? Isn’t that for our King to decide? Shouldn’t we try and postpone such negotiations until he can be part of them? He should have a chance to make or refuse the commitment himself!” Ser Gerold was really passionate about this.
Now Benjen Starke spoke up.
“He has a point there brother. Well, I would propose to let us sleep on it and we will discuss this further when we all have had time to weigh all the pros and cons. You’ve had the opportunity to think on this for moons.” He hesitantly smiled at his brother, a silent excuse for not choosing his side immediately. “Give us at least a little time to do the same.” He pleaded.

Howland saw everyone agreeing with Benjen Stark and Ned slumping back into his chair, thoughtfully sipping his ale. Howland decided to intervene.

“Perhaps it is time to take a short break and get some fresh air. What do you say? We could reconvene here in an hour?”

That suggestion was met with enthusiasm and everyone moved outdoors.

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Howland Reed had followed Lord Stark who had been walking some distance before he reached a secluded spot. A fallen tree provided a suitable opportunity to sit down in a dry spot. The two of them sat down leaving enough space between them to comfortable seat two.

“How are the children, Ned?” Howland asked looking sideways at Ned starting a topic that would hopefully get him to relax.

“They’re all fine and getting along. Robb likes to train more than to study. But then he is a boy.” Ned smiled, images of his children popping up in his mind. “Sansa is a miniature little lady. Only five and she copies everything Cat does. She makes this perfect little bow when she greets people. I already told you she used to playact that she’s a mother to Arya instead of using a doll? Well, lately Arya has started to rebel against that. Mind you, she’s just turned three. I look at Arya and I am reminded of Lyanna. That little girl is the first of my children that has the Stark look. Now that I come to think of it, she looks a lot like Jon. They both resemble Lyanna. Sometimes it makes me feel melancholic to watch one of my youngest daughter’s antics.”

Howland saw Ned make an effort to regroup. He once more tried to redirect Ned’s thoughts. “And your youngest, Brandon you called him if I recall correctly?”

That put the smile firmly back on Ned’s face. “He’s doing great! He’s growing up so fast. He is already taller than Arya though she is a year older than him. His wet nurse complains that she needs eyes on her back to keep him safe. He is constantly climbing on things. He’s very inventive. He climbs on a chair, moves onto the table and then scales even higher to some shelves that are positioned at a dangerous height for a two year old, simply to reach for something that has caught his eye. He has already had some close calls but is seemingly too young to understand us when we forbid him to do it again. Either that or he won’t listen.”

Howland saw Ned shifting his focus to him. “Never mind my children, how are yours? Meera must be six by now and Jojen, I guess he must be three?”

“That’s right. They are doing fine as well. I think Meera has a little girl’s crush on Jon. It is so cute to see her trying to get his attention at meals or in between lessons. Jojen on the other hand is a dreamer and can be found by himself more often than in company, which is strange in one so young. But I suppose each child has its own personality and we parents need to find the best way to direct them towards a valiant path in life.”

Howland saw Ned nod in response.
Ned contemplated, “I have four children every one of them is unique. I guess if the Gods are willing to grant me another, it will turn out to be substantially different from his siblings as well.”
“Do you think it is about time to head back inside?” Howland inquired suddenly conscious that they had been outside for some time now. “Look at us, two proud fathers loosing track of time bragging about our children’s exploits. Our women should see us now.” Howland chuckled.

“I think is time, yes. Let’s head that way and we’ll surely encounter the others. But before we do, I would like to arrange a small meeting, just Benjen you and me. Perhaps we could break our fast tomorrow in private? I would like your input on some things I would rather not discuss in our entire group before I am clearer on my own take on them. I even want to ask you when or even if we should bring these topics in the open anyway or whether it is better to keep them in the dark, going against our initial intentions of keeping everyone up to date.”

Howland was sure he had a good idea of what it was that Ned was struggling with. “Of course Ned, I will arrange it. You just need to inform your brother.”

Howland and Ned walked in companionable silence towards the castle.

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Some time later back in the solar.

“You have all seen that Jon is making big strides in his swords play.” Howland Reed was discussing Jon now.

“Indeed”, Ser Arthur took over from him, “Jon knows the basic moves well enough. Although he often complains he hardly ever has a ‘real’ adversary and is mostly swinging in the air or hacking at straw puppets. But taking all this time to teach him the basics is clearly paying off. I can state with absolute certainty that he will have a strong stance and in time will be able to move on instinct so he can concentrate entirely on his opponent in a real fight. As far as you can say this of a ten year old, in my opinion Jon has the potential to be more than a decent sword fighter. He is light on his feet and shows an aptitude to guess the next move of his opponent. I am more than satisfied with his progress so far. I think our little King will amaze us in later years.”

“I think we can all agree on that, having seen him train this morning.” Lord Stark uttered. Howland saw nods all around.

“Any other aspects of his education that need to be discussed today? As far as I can tell he is doing well on all topics, the Maester finds him a most diligent pupil. He shows interest in politics, and already picks up on the nuances of the intricate relationships between the houses. He is also impressed at his fluency in High Valerian. It was a good idea to raise him in both languages as soon as he learned to speak. The Celtigars did right by him. Another visit there would benefit the community at the Driftmark as well. They will all be glad to see him again.”

Ser Gerold was the one who answered. “We’ll discuss the logistics of such a trip between the three of us. But it could be done I suppose. I would suggest travelling in larger company just to be safe. And Jon will want to bring his dog along as well.” Howland, Eddard and Benjen shared meaningful looks at that last statement.

“I would conclude that his education is going better than expected and see no need to discuss this further at this point in time. “ Howland Reed tried to move the meeting along. He was getting tired.

We still need to discuss how to handle the other Kingdoms. And how to check in on Viserys and Daenerys in the free cities, make sure that they have enough funds and are safe for now. Let’s start with the Reach, shall we? If it gets too late we can postpone the rest until we reconvene tomorrow late afternoon.”

Ser Manderly started to discuss his contacts in that area and he meeting continued for another hour.
Breakfast was a large assortment consisting mostly of bread and vegetables. ‘These crannogmen take their connection to nature really to all levels of their life.’ Benjen scanned the various choices trying to make a selection. The others were already seated at the table of a secluded chamber in the eastern corner of the keep. The morning sun partly successful in breaking through the light fog hanging over the swamps, made the small space look more inviting.

“Well Ned”, Howland was allowed to be more informal with Lord Stark while in private. They had been through so much together already and were intimate friends rather than Liege Lord and vassal. “Let’s hear it. What did you want to discuss this morning.”

Ned turned towards him with a serious look in his eyes. “Several decisions I am struggling with actually. I’ve been over them with Benjen a few times but we do not think entirely alike on them. “Let’s start with the easier one. Benjen suggests fostering Robb for a few moons, perhaps a year at Greywater Watch with Jon. Let’s say after Jon’s visit to the Driftmark. He thinks it would be a good idea to create a close bond between the two of them.” He looked over to Benjen.

“A friendship between the two of them would secure good relations between a re-established Dynasty and the North. Sort of what was the case with King Robert and Ned in previous years, before they were at odds.” Benjen offered as further explanation.

“As far as King Robert and the rest of the Seven Kingdoms are concerned. We have reconciled.” Ned intervened. “Everyone saw us fight side by side during the Greyjoy Rebellion. I have even promised him not to wait too long this time to visit him in Kingslanding. Things get more convoluted all the time. I am not proud of my actions toward Robert.” Ned sighed

Benjen thought it wise to get the conversation back on track. “Of course, if you and your wife are amenable to taking on the care of another boy for a small period of time.” he added politely addressing Lord Reed.

“I agree on all counts.” Howland smiled. I would love to get to know Robb better and I’m sure my wife, Meera, Jojen and last but not least Jon will be elated to have such a nice addition to our little family for a while. I also agree it is vital to develop a sound relationship between the future King and the future Warden of the North.

“What else is on your mind, Ned? I do not want to pressure you but our time this morning is limited.” Howland knew the most difficult topic still had to be raised.

“Well”, Ned seemed unsure how to phrase his next concern.

Benjen interrupted. “It’s about the magic, warging, dragons. But most of all we disagree on the fact of keeping Jon in the dark. Maester Aemon and I have discussed this. We are of a mind that Jon needs to know at the latest beginning next year. If we want to have a chance to use the dragons in the conflict, they need to have time to grow in order to be of use. And more importantly Maester Aemon is adamant that the younger Jon is when he bonds with them, the better chance he will have to control them. But we can’t let him hatch dragons if he doesn’t know what he is.”

Benjen was determined to defend his point of view. Hiss brother had tried too long to keep him silent on this subject but he deemed Howland Reed a worthy ally in this endeavour. He was a greenseer. He was not as wary of magic as Ned was.

“But what if the eggs are just what they seem to be? What if they are just three beautiful stones?”
Ned argued. “Then we will have told Jon much too soon and he will be deprived of his youth. You know him. He will not take this lightly. He will start brooding and he is much too young for all of this.” Ned pleaded.

“I humbly disagree.” Howland stated. “He has us to guide him. We will help him carry this burden. He will not be alone. And he will have time to grow into his role. What do you propose to do? Say hey Jon you are the rightful King, now claim your throne tomorrow.” Howland wasn’t mincing his words. “We have no right to take his birthright away from him. Controlling Dragons is in his blood. If we hinder this, he will probably hatch them himself when he comes of age. If he learns that he cannot develop his bond with them sufficiently enough to keep them in line, it won’t be long before he knows we are to blame for this. Do not forget, in a few years we will be subservient to him, and I mean this literally.

“Besides, if Maester Aemon tells true, we will know whether there is a possibility to hatch the eggs. He has informed us that we just need to let Jon hold them. His reaction will leave us no doubt. If he is destined to hatch the eggs, he will experience something. Maester Aemon didn’t want to get into the particulars with us, this being one of the “for Targaryen eyes only things’ a phrase he uses too often to my liking.” Benjen said with a frustrating sigh.

“What’s keeping us from just letting Jon admire three beautiful stones and get him to hold them between his hands? We could try that and wait to say how it plays out.” Howland intervened.

“Well for one, the eggs are at the Wall for now.” Ned stalled.

“Maester Aemon won’t live forever.” Benjen countered.

He had another arrow left to point at his brother. “You were against that warging business as well. Look how that has turned out. He is in total control of several smaller animals already but doesn’t mistreat them and has never been caught using this power for the wrong reasons, except for a few small harmless pranks at the beginning. However I agree with Lord Reed’s suggestion to see how he reacts to ‘three beautiful stones’ and go from there.” He looked over to his brother, his stare unwavering.

“I suppose we could try that.” Ned reluctantly agreed. But I suggest we wait until Robb returns from his stay at Greywater. Jon can come along with us and travel first to Winterfell for a long overdue visit, then travel onwards to the Wall where he can meet Maester Aemon and touch those damn eggs.”

‘That will buy me another year at least. Jon first has to visit the Driftmark and then he will spend almost a year with Rob at Greywater Watch’, Ned reassured himself. ‘He will be a bit older and will hopefully be a bit more mature before we dump this burden on him.’

Aloud he just said. “In the meanwhile, let us be careful when dealing with Jon. He already suspects we are hiding something from him. He has noticed Jojen isn’t being followed around by a knight every single moment as he is. I sometimes can see him trying to figure it out but not wanting to let on he suspects something so as not to get us to be even more careful about what we say to him.”

“Well there is a positive side to that as well Ned.” Howland tried to ease Ned’s mood. “You only dwell on all the negative sides of a situation. This means Jon has good instincts, even if he trusts us implicitly. He still thinks for himself. He will make a good king.” Benjen nodded enthusiastically.

“Someone has to look at the other angle.” Ned persisted. “But you are right about that though. Jon will be good for the Seven Kingdoms.” A small smile appeared on his face.
Several days later, Howland saw his fellow conspirators leave Greywater Watch in a single line. They had said lengthy goodbyes to Jon in the courtyard earlier. Jon had struggled to keep his emotions in check not wanting to be perceived as a little boy any longer. However he had hugged his uncle Benjen desperately. Benjen had been obliged to carefully separate himself from Jon by grasping his arms and untangling them. After that they had persuaded the boy to stay in the courtyard and to continue his drills with Ser Arthur.

The last figures navigated a curve in their path and disappeared behind the trees. Howland went back inside. Much had been accomplished these last few days. Much more needed to be agreed upon still. He wondered how things would play out in the next few years. He would have to try and use his green dreams to detect any possible harm that their newly cemented decisions could cause. He would focus first on the potential new allies, Ser Davos Seaworth, Sandor Clegane, Ser Barristan Selmy and Prince Oberyn, perhaps also Varys. It would not be the first time that Howland had prevented possible detection by means of his ‘sight’.

Interlude 4: Little birds

The Red Keep, some years into King Robert’s reign

Varys suffered a headache. The small council had been a waste of time once more. What more could you expect from that bunch of sycophants constantly striving for the King’s favour. He could hardly stand Petyr Baelish. How had that conniving whoremonger wormed its way into the small council? He was no more than an insignificant little lord of a nothing patch of land in the Fingers. Not to mention the elderly Grand Maester Pycelle who hardly contributed anything substantial but was always ready to agree with anything the King or Lord Arryn brought forward. On the agenda featured always more spending: another feast; another acquisition; more renovations to the Red Keep. The King and the Queen seemed to be involved in a struggle to prove who could spend the most in the shortest amount of time. Only Stannis Baratheon, the Master of Ships, when finally urged out of his silence was known to bring a bit of sense to these ridiculous gatherings. Renly Baratheon, the Master of Laws was more absent than present and Mace Tyrell was just another empty headed puppet only here because the Kingdom needed to obtain the vast food resources of the Reach and to allocate a seat on the council to house Tyrell was the surest way to get an abundance of that as cheap as possible.

Several years into King Robert’s reign and the crown had already spent millions of gold dragons. Gold happily provided by Tywin Lannister until recently. Lord Lannister had been absent for some time now, allegedly taking a trip to do some business in Essos. Littlefinger was charged to find the funds for the upcoming tournament that King Robert wanted to organise yet again. The Master of Coin had just smirked and acquiesced.

The tournament was probably another try to lure Lord Eddard Stark to the capital. Not that it would work of course. King Robert really didn’t know his best friend well. A tournament to most people of the North was just frivolous entertainment, little knights playing at war. The North didn’t knight people. Valour was proven in deeds, not with empty titles. What was more, Varys knew that Eddard
Stark even if he would attend, would never participate in the tournament. No matter what prize was dangled in front of the would-be-champions. No, Eddard Stark kept his prowess with his sword close to his chest. He was not keen to give his enemies any insight on how to beat him. But Varys knew better. He was certain that Lord Stark was one of the most underrated warriors of Westeros. King Robert would have to find another way to reconnect with his former foster brother.

Once more Varys mentally went over all the new songs his little birds had sung. It was truly frustrating. Something was stirring in the Seven Kingdoms and Varys couldn’t get a handle on it. Either there were no rumours to explain a disappearance or there were too many conflicting rumours. Varys had started to notice this a year after the Rebellion. Before, he had been able trust the information that reached him, every rumour bore at least some spark of truth and hardly needed verifying. These last few years however there were so many contradictions in the reports, it seemed his spider web was compromised. Moreover, someone was deliberately provoking him. They rubbed his nose in it. They wanted him to know that they recognised his little birds and fed them whatever false information they wanted. They were playing with him, something Baelish would do. But no, he was sure it was not Baelish. His birds reached parts of society that Littlefinger’s whores could never penetrate.

This was the first time in his career as a spymaster that Varys was at a loss. He had tried everything: doubling the number of his minions, never sending his birds to the same place more than twice, nothing helped. Sometimes he suspected some kind of magic to be involved. Something akin to the visions the Lord of Light showed his disciples in the fire?

There were three issues where the sabotage was most prominent, three issues he had yet to resolve. He had all but given up on the first one. The disappearance almost four years ago of three great knights of Westeros: the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Ser Gerold Hightower, the Sword of the Morning, Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Oswell Whent, member of the Kingsguard. No official report could deny or confirm whether they were at the Trident that fateful day. Their bodies were never found. The greatsword Dawn had disappeared without a trace. A delegation of house Dayne had repeatedly petitioned the King to return the famous sword to their house thinking the King’s forces had confiscated it after the battle. King Robert had ordered Varys to find the sword but after all this time not the slightest whisper had reached his ears. The sword remained lost.

His birds had sung him several possible scenarios with the kind of details that would have you believe each one of them. Varys suspected the truth was not among them. Varys had his own theory of course. Most likely the three had fled to Essos when all hope was lost and their Prince was floating in the Trident. The smallfolk and most nobles didn’t believe this theory. They couldn’t rhyme such dishonourable behaviour with these white knights. These three former Kingsguards were still revered as heroes in Westeros alongside Ser Barristan Selmy. Varys however found no dishonour in going into exile to protect the two remaining siblings of Rhaegar in the free cities. If the missing knights were still alive, they would still be loyal to the Targaryens and would show up at the hiding place of the prince and princess at some point. However nobody resembling their description had tried to contact the royal children or their entourage yet. Varys was sure. He had a lot of eyes on them in the free cities but still nothing to show for it.

Varys contemplated the plight of Ser Barristan once more. He often reminisced with the present Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and had concluded that the knight knew nothing of the whereabouts of his three former brothers. He was clearly miserable and not at all happy with the new additions King Robert had appointed to his Kingsguard. Ser Barristan also seemed wary of Jaime Lannister, the so-called kingslayer. No, Ser Barristan was a dead end as far as his investigation into this disappearance was concerned.
The second issue concerned Ser Gregor Clegane. Everybody knew of his trial in Dorne and the barbaric way in which he was finally executed. The entire realm had talked of it for moons on end. Most were secretly glad that he was finally punished. Very few agreed with the brutal killing of the innocent royal children but even fewer had dared to speak up. Now in the taverns of Fleabottom songs could be heard relating the downfall of the “baby slayer”.

Nobody however knew why Ser Gregor Clegane had apparently ventured so close to Dorne. It had been a stupid thing to do. He would surely have known how fiercely the Dornish hated him. Varys wouldn’t shed a tear about Ser Gregor but he would worry about what it all meant. His little birds had brought him too many opposing theories featuring his fate. Varys was sure that someone had made a calculated move. Someone had handed Ser Gregor Clegane to the Dornish in order to get Dorne to owe them a favour. But what or why? Varys was still no closer to solving this riddle? He suspected the North to be involved based on some descriptions of people that had visited Dorne around the time of The Mountain’s trial but couldn’t fathom why. Besides would Ned Stark really be involved in something underhanded?

When the third mystery struck Westeros, Varys had almost lost it. His pride would have been hurt if even one major issue could not be solved. But these were three major happenings that had the potential to influence the game of thrones to the detriment of the current leadership. How was he to explain the absence of Lord Tywin Lannister?

The Warden of the West was a player. He had played the Game of Thrones impeccably until recently. He had power, he was rich, he commanded a large army and curried favour with the King since he all but paid for the King’s expenses single handed and was the King’s good fathers for crying out loud. So to just disappear, it made no sense.
And what really worried Varys was that in this case, he had been played by someone, or some group of persons more likely, even before he had know that Lord Lannister was missing. His little birds had never sung so loud.
Uncountable sources stated that the Warden had gone on a trading mission to Essos and would soon be back. Many others had overheard that he had gone to look for his missing relative Gerion Lannister and had probably also been captured by pirates. A theory as ridiculous as you could think up, but his birds only reported back what they heard, so someone had spread that particular rumour.

A third theory that had popped up in Lannisport was that Tywin had contracted “the old man’s disease” and that his mind was gone. He wouldn’t even recognise his own family any longer and was a virtual prisoner at Casterly Rock since the Lannisters didn’t want the realm to know their blood could be contaminated with this hereditary disease.

Another theory closely resembled the previous one but spoke of the “whore’s disease”.

Then there were the rumours of a kidnapping gone wrong. The kidnappers having supposedly been too rough during their interrogation, it was said that Lord Lannister had died of his wounds before the kidnappers had extracted the necessary information from him to gain entrance to the famed Lannister goldmines. This theory was the most probable in Varys’ eyes. It did make sense to kidnap a very rich guy but such an action should leave some kind of trace of the kidnappers for Varys to unearth?

But no matter what he had tried, not a sliver of proof could be found to give credit to this theory so it was more than likely another false tale. There were a few other theories going around but they were too ridiculous to even start to investigate.

The point of the matter however was that nothing really explained Lord Tywin’s continued absence in Kingslanding.

Strangely enough, it seemed nobody in Kingslanding seemed to worry about that. King Robert had never once asked Varys to investigate where Lord Lannister was. Well perhaps it was not that
strange, seeing that King Robert still had enough gold to whore, drink and feast as much as he pleased.
But why was there no reaction from the Lannister Queen or from her brother, the Kingslayer? In the last session of the small council nobody had even mentioned Lord Tywin’s name. Everybody seemed happy without the interfering presence of the power grabbing Warden of the West.

The only Lannister that had taken some action was Tyrion, the imp. But Tyrion played it close to his vest and didn’t confide in the Master of Whisperers. It had been up to Varys’ little birds to find traces of the investigation that Tyrion had mounted on his own behalf. Tyrion suspected something was up but didn’t know what either.

Varys had considered swallowing his pride and try to get information from Petyr Baelish, but in the end he couldn’t humiliate himself, not even as a last resort. Littlefinger probably would have heard only half of the theories that Varys himself had ferreted out with his vast network anyway.

Better to focus on other matters for now. There was all that movement in the North, boats, glass houses, Moat Cailin, Benjen Stark’s constant travels for the Night’s Watch. Then there was Dorne’s restlessness. Oberyn Martell had been poking around Kingslanding a few times and even exchanged information with Varys. Only nothing had come up that had helped shed a light on his most pressing issues.
And last but not least, there was the issue of the new location of the Targaryen children in Essos. If Varys could trust his little birds, the North was involved somehow.

It seemed the North had some vague, unconfirmed connection to all his open issues. No matter how unlikely each theory was separately, Varys didn’t believe in coincidences. He made the mental note to intercept Benjen Stark somehow when the man next visited the capital on official Night’s Watch business. He would also reach out to Prince Oberyn. The Prince had mentioned an encounter with the younger Stark sibling.

Varys would bide his time. Patience was his strong suit. In time his birds would sing the correct songs or he would get his information from other sources, be it Benjen Stark, Oberyn Martell or another idea that would strike him soon. Varys felt a little better and decided to start with tracking Benjen Stark’s movements.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter Jon and Robb live together at Greywater Watch for some time.
The interlude will be a future glimpse of Daenerys and Jon.
Friends or family

Chapter Summary

Jon and Robb become friends
Dany gets to meet Jon.

Chapter Notes

In the main chapter Jon and Robb are ten going on eleven namedays old.
The interlude is a glimpse of the future

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Greywater Watch

Jon got out of his bed and looked out of the window. After a week with nothing but rain, he could see the sun trying to break through the clouds. He smiled. Today would be a great day. Today would be the first day since his new friend’s arrival that they would be able to venture outside.

One day, a few months after Jon’s sixth name day the Warden of the North had arrived for an official visit to house Reed at Greywater watch. The first time Jon saw Lord Eddard Stark, Jon had been training in the yard. His obligatory lesson had been finished but Jon was repeating the moves he had learned. Lord Stark had startled him when he had interrupted Jon’s movements. He had given him some pointers to ameliorate his stance.

Jon had been struck mute by the commanding presence of the man. To him the Lord of Winterfell looked larger than life. However Lord Stark had been patient and kind to Jon. After a few moments Jon had been able to stammer a greeting and a thank you.

This was the start of their strange relationship. The great Lord, whose visit lasted for two sennights that time, would often seek Jon out. He could also be seen talking to Jon’s ever present shadows. After a few days, Jon had shed his shy reluctance and had started to open up.

Jon had found out that Lord Stark was the big brother of his ‘uncle’ Benjen. Did that make him kind of an ‘uncle’ to him as well? Was that why he wants to get to know me? He had wondered about this more than once.

One morning shortly after breaking their fast, Lord Stark had invited Jon for a trip to the Godswood of Greywater Watch. They had walked side by side, both soaking up the peaceful atmosphere of this sacred place. No words had been needed. After a while Lord Stark had invited Jon to sit down against a beautiful weirwood tree and did the same.

“This must be the finest Godswood in the entire realm.” He had said quietly to Jon.
“The Godswood in Winterfell is impressive as well, but here it feels as if the presence of the Old
Gods is even stronger. At least that is what I feel deep down."
He looked over to his nephew. "Benjen told me you worship the Old Gods as well?"

Jon had simply nodded. Lord Stark had stayed silent so Jon felt safe to elaborate.
"Lord Reed is a very inspiring teacher and when uncle Benjen is at Greywater Watch he always asks me to accompany him on his visits to the Godwood. He was the one who showed me how to pray. His Gods have become my Gods. When I am here, I can feel they allow my presence, like they have accepted me although I was born in the South."
He had looked over to Lord Stark. "Does that make any sense?"

"It actually makes a lot of sense Jon. I am glad to see you have embraced the Old Gods. I hope they can help you as they do me. There is no place like a Godwood to help you clear your mind. Working through your problems is easier when you can focus. I've solved many a dilemma during my prayers in the Godwood."

Jon had been amazed that the Warden of the North had opened up to him like this. It had been the first time that he saw a vulnerable side to the man. Jon had always looked up to this formidable Lord ruling a large Kingdom never imagining he struggled with things as well. He knew uncle Benjen admired him greatly.

"Tell me about your lessons. Can you tell me what your favourite topics are? Are there things you have difficulty with?" he had heard Lord Stark ask.

"I'm learning all kind of things. Most of them I like. I greatly enjoyed learning the names of the great houses of the Crownlands, their sigils, their words, customs and their alliances. I loved to boast to the Maester how I could recite them all by heart. But then he came up with more. He makes me learn about all the big and minor houses of the entire realm and the Stepstones until I think my head will burst." Jon had realised he had been whining and had tried to change his tone.

"I think I am good with languages. I adore my physical education although I would like to learn to fight for real. I would prefer to spend more time on that instead of being stuck inside for another lesson with the Maester. He can be boring."

"Lessons can not help but be boring sometimes. But you should remind yourself that they are necessary. Knowledge is power, you know. I am still learning new things every day, mostly through experience now, which is a lot less tedious but I am learning all the same.

Facts that seem dull to you now, may come in handy later for instance during trade negotiations or settling disputes. I sometimes have to negotiate marriage alliances for the sons and daughters of my bannermen and am grateful for every detail I know about their history. Knowledge also helps me in keeping the North prosper and the people well-fed." Lord Stark had smiled at the boy.
"I hope I am not the one who is boring you now?"
Jon had blushed. "No my Lord, I am grateful for your advice. "

In reality he had soaked up every word. As of that moment he had a new resolution. He would make the most of the education and opportunities he was offered. He realised that, although life seemingly had dealt him a bad card when you considered the fact that he had been orphaned only days after he was born, he had been really lucky to have been assigned such a great support system.

That grateful feeling had diminished a bit however when Lord Stark had told him about his son and daughters, Jon had grown quiet.
Six year old Jon had been sad to see Lord Eddard Stark leave.
‘Well it had taken more than four years for Lord Eddard Stark to send Robb to him’, Jon thought a little aggrieved. ‘He could have sent him sooner.’

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The two ten year olds had hit it off immediately and had become inseparable from the very first day. Being almost the same age, they challenged each other. Robb was adequately versed in his knowledge of the great houses of Westeros. Jon however could boast a better grasp of foreign languages.

Robb had been surprised that Jon was even being taught the old tongue of the North. Very few people of the North even knew that language still existed. And when Jon started to speak fluently in High Valyrian, Robb had had to admit he only knew a few words. Later, in the bedroom they shared, Jon had shyly related that he could write that language as well stating as proof the letters he wrote once a moon to a Maester of the Night’s Watch who was more competent to correct them than his teacher at Greywater Watch.

Robb being the elder by two moons often played this as his trump card during games. ‘The elder must always start’, being one of his examples. Robb clearly had more experience playing children’s game and used all kind of tricks Jon had not known were possible to evade Jon when playing tag.

However when Robb used his ‘I’m the eldest’ card during their indoor lessons, he wasn’t as successful. Jon smiled thinking back on a hilarious mistake Robb had made yesterday during a geography lesson. Jon could teach Robb a thing or two about geography if he wanted. Robb either didn’t have a good teacher at Winterfell or hadn’t payed enough attention. Jon suspected the latter, since his new friend seemed intelligent enough.

Robb told him plenty about his home, Winterfell. Jon had heard about the castle before of course, mostly from ‘uncle’ Benjen. However Robb told about Winterfell from the point of view of a young boy and Jon was riveted by his stories.

“You know, they all call me My Lord. Even if they are at least three times as old as me. Some even bow, although it will be ages before I will ever become their Lord. The servants almost trip over themselves to be the one who can open the door for me, or be best placed to serve me my food. Even the Lords of the North always go out of their way to be amiable. “

Robb had smiled at Jon. “And all the while I am trying not to show how intimidated I am by them when they are presenting their cases when father is absent.”

“You’re hearing their cases?” Jon’s eyes had asked wide eyed.

“Well, they only bring the small issues forth when father is not there. Also Master Luwin and mother flank me and I hardly have to say a word. Like I said, I try not to piss my pants.”

Both of them had giggled.

Robb had entertained Jon with tales of his siblings, how different Arya and Sansa were, how he was glad that his youngest sibling had been a boy although it would be a long time before they could spar together, but that he looked forward to teach him all he knew once this brother was old enough.
He had also described the snow and the difference of the Godswood here compared to the one at Winterfell. Robb seemed not to mind answering Jon’s never ending questions.

Jon did envy Robb. Not only was Robb’s father someone important that Jon knew well, he was a real nephew of Jon’s ‘uncle’ Benjen, and not an adopted one as Jon claimed himself to be. Robb also had two sisters, a little brother and a mother. Robb’s mother had lived through four childbeds already. Jon’s mother however … Jon redirected his thoughts. No use dwelling on this, better enjoy the change of weather. He started to dress himself with clothes fit to play and spar outside.

Jon couldn’t help returning to his previous line of thought and compare his life to Robb’s once more. Greywater Watch was the only home Jon really knew and Lord Reed was like a father to him. He treated Jon kindly, always made time at the end of the evening meal to discuss his day with him. Several lessons were giving by Lord Reed personally. But he wasn’t family, not really.

Lord Reed’s daughter, well she was a girl and when she was in his company she demanded his attention constantly and Jon indulged her but her little girl’s games were not his cup of tea and his schedule didn’t allow for much interaction with the girl anyway. Her brother, Jojen was only five and a rather passive child. Jon preferred the outdoors, Jojen on the other hand preferred to stay indoors doing … Actually Jon didn’t really know what the boy did all day. He practically only saw him at meals.

‘I am not entitled to be ungrateful’, Jon reprimanded himself, ‘I have a good life here, even if it sometimes can feel a bit lonely. Besides my three shadows can be entertaining company if I get them to loosen up and I mustn’t forget Max.’

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In the courtyard where they would shortly start their first real sparring session, the boys were putting on their armour that consisted out of pieces of boiled leather awkwardly fitted to match their size. Due to a spell of bad weather, they had been limited to indoor physical exercises that enhanced muscular strength and endurance. They had noticed they had been taught different drills in the past. Robb had shown Jon some typical Northern fighting moves which looked a bit rough to Jon but he could see how they could help generate power in a fighter’s strikes. Jon guessed their fighting styles would be rather different as well and couldn’t wait to spar with Robb if they were allowed. He really hoped so!

“Be glad it is Ser Oswell today”, Jon informed Robb, “Ser Arthur would surely take your sword away and correct your stance for at least half an hour.”

“There is nothing wrong with my stance.” Robb replied offended. “I didn’t say there was,” Jon tried to soften his statement. “It is just the way Ser Arthur is. You will come to understand what I mean. Do not say I haven’t warned you. Ser Arthur is a perfectionist.”

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“Ready boys?” Ser Oswell had been able to enter the courtyard unnoticed, the boys clearly enjoying each other’s company. He smiled when he saw them startle. ‘It will be good for my King to have a boy his own age to keep him company for a change.’ He thought. ‘Robb seems like a nice boy.’ He changed his facial expression trying to mimic a strict teacher’s face.
“Well, where are your training swords, no use lingering, let’s see what you can do.” He addressed his King’s cousin. “Robb, you first. I will charge at your right side a few times and then swing at your left. Let me see how well you defend.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Ser Oswell noticed Jon was studying Robb’s movements keenly taking in every reaction to Ser Oswell’s attacks. He was proud of his King. His observations would help him since Robb was taught a completely different fighting style.

Jon moved more during fights, often deflecting strikes totally or meeting the thrusts when they were losing momentum. He also knew how to use an opponent’s power against him making him lose balance. Jon had learned to be patient and wait for an opening. Robb on the other hand liked to meet his opponent’s strikes head on throwing his body weight forward. Almost on every strike the boy tried to turn defence into attack.

“Your turn, Jon.”

Ser Oswell had gone easy on Robb, but still the boy was sweating profusely and needed a rest. “You need to conserve your energy in a fight Robb. Rest up while I’ll give Jon his warming up session. You will want to be rested when you face him next.”

Ser Oswell now started the same exercises with Jon but making subtle changes in his angles not striking the same places over and over as he had done with Robb. ‘We taught our King well’, he couldn’t help think to himself. ‘Well it would be a shame if a Kingsguard wouldn’t be a better teacher than a simple northern master at arms, but I am glad to see it confirmed all the same.’

“Take a five minute break. Be sure to drink some water and then I want you to face each other. Now dismissed.” Ser Oswell addressed the two boys.

He was really enjoying himself. He knew Ser Gerold was watching the entire training session from a window. For certain Ser Arthur would be very disappointed that he wasn’t here to witness the first time their protégé took on a trained opponent his own age and see with his own eyes how their combined efforts over the years had made him already substantially superior to his peers.

The boys were eager to end their break and face each other. They both took their starting position before Ser Oswell had to order them to. However they obediently waited for him to signal the start of the fight.

Even though Jon had paid close attention during Robb’s earlier bout with Ser Oswell, the knight saw Jon was taken aback when the boy came at him at full strength with his very first strike. Jon almost tripped and could only deflect the strike in the nick of time. He quickly adjusted his stance and successfully countered Robb’s next attacks, often just evading them. Robb clearly frustrated by this but still overconfident after the success of his first big strike, overextended a swing and Jon had his opening. His sword point firmly fixed in Robb’s armpit he called out. “Yield”.

He saw Robb’s look of surprise. It was clear the boy never had been defeated in less than two minutes by someone his own age. His King noble as ever tried to soften the blow.

“Let’s try again, I simply got lucky.” And both boys resumed their starting positions.

“Robb, you don’t need to force all your strength into it to get what you want. How much strength you use often doesn’t matter as much as where you hit. Focus on your opponent, find his weakness.” Ser Oswell encouraged Robb.

Robb nodded, a determined look on his face.
This time they circled each other for a bit. Robb clearly having decided to let Jon make the first move this time. Jon executed a certain combination of strikes that Ser Arthur had taught him a moon ago. He had made Jon repeat them at least a hundred times until his muscles were unable to lift a sword only to have to repeat them again the next day.

The knight saw Robb having trouble with the speed of his opponent’s moves. Ser Oswell immediately noticed the moment Jon decided to hold back. The boy clearly didn’t want to humble his new friend too much. He saw that his King wouldn’t let his friend win, but he made a valiant effort to lengthen the fight. Jon had made slight adjustments to his initial battle plan and let Robb get some strikes in without being too obvious.

Ser Oswell forced himself to quit studying Jon and switched his attention to Robb trying to decide which advice would have the most immediate effect. It wouldn’t do to change his northern fighting style that relied mostly on strength, but he could give Robb a few pointers so the boy knew how to avoid giving too many openings to his opponent and he could certainly give him tips on how to conserve energy.

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Both boys were seated on a bench in the corner of the courtyard. Training was over and they were both exhausted and sweaty.

Robb looked at Jon. “You weren’t kidding when you said they like to drill you to the point of breaking, or when you told me how they make you repeat the same moves over and over again. I don’t think I have ever been this weary.”

He studied the younger boy closely and continued. “You’re lucky with such a teacher, and you say you have three? I thought you were too skinny to hurt me much, but the speed with which you swing your weapon is amazing. I hope they can teach me how to do that.”

“Heal realise I have never ever lost to another boy in less than five minutes at Winterfell? Not even to Theon Greyjoy and he is more than a year older than me! I always believed I was good at swordplay.” Robb tried his best not to be a sore loser.

“You are a good fighter Robb. I just fight a little different than you do. You first have to get to know how an opponent fights and then figure out how to beat him. You will do better in a few days. Besides, you will have the benefit of my teachers for a few moons and when you return to Winterfell you can soundly beat this Theon Greyjoy, perhaps even in under five minutes.” Jon teasingly nudged Robb’s shoulder.

“Who is he by the way? You haven’t mentioned him before.

“Theon Greyjoy is a boy who is a year older than us. He will live with us at Winterfell for a few years. He arrived a few moons ago. My father had to take him in on King Robert’s orders. His family was defeated in the Greyjoy Rebellion and he stays with us so his father will not attack again.” Robb explained

“So he is an Ironborn, a kraken?” Jon’s eyes were wide as saucers now. “Is he civilized enough to live with you? I was taught the Ironborn live the ‘Old Way’ and only use things they stole.”
“Yes he is a Greyjoy, the only son left of that family.” Robb sighed. “Father told us to give him a chance. He said we could teach him our ways. He will not be allowed to steal anything and we will provide him with clothes and other things. But he boasts all of the time. Tells us all kind of things he has already done, even with girls!”

Jon looked at Robb a brief shock on his face but stayed silent so Robb would tell him more.

“He challenges me at every opportunity. I’ve already been punished several times for going along with one of his crazy plans. I even believed father had decided to send me to Greywater Watch as some kind of punishment but now I think I got that wrong.” He smiled at Jon. “Being here seems more like a reward to me.” He shifted bit closer to Jon. “I really like you.”

Jon blushed and shyly returned Robb’s smile. “I really like you too Robb. You’re my best friend even“, he paused and added looking a bit impish “if you are my only friend that is not an adult.”

A comfortable silence ensued.

“You know”, Robb started talking again.
“I overheard Lord Reed talking to the Maester. They were discussing when exactly I would return to Winterfell, but do you know what they said after that?” Robb finished mysteriously. He couldn’t wait to tell Jon but liked the bit of suspense he was creating.

“You have to go back earlier than planned?” Jon looked deflated.

“No! If anything I am staying longer! But they were talking about you coming along to Winterfell. Father invited you Jon!” Robb's enthusiasm was contagious.

Jon lightened up and studied Robb to see whether he was serious.
“Really? I get to see Winterfell, are you sure? Meet your brother and your sisters?” Jon paused then he raised his voice even more. “Will uncle Benjen be there?”

Robb grinned. “Of course I am sure. It was not a suggestion. They were talking logistics. What to take, who would accompany you.” He considered something and resumed looking more serious now.

“You know you are right. You are never allowed to go anywhere alone. Not here and certainly not to Winterfell.”

Robb looked significantly to Ser Gerold who was sitting in the opposite corner of the courtyard trying not to listen in but still keeping an eye on the boys all the same.

“I know”, Jon answered quietly,
“Sometimes I make up stories. For instance I imagine that I am some rich orphan from an Essossi Noble House living in exile in Westeros and they have to keep me safe from assassins.”

“Kind of like the two Targaryens living in the free cities?” Robb asked.

“Kind of, but the other way around, I guess.” Jon agreed. “Besides”, his voice had dropped to a whisper, “Can you keep a secret?”

Robb nodded, he was intrigued by Jon’s demeanour.

Jon whispered insistently. “I mean not tell anyone, not even your parents, not your siblings, certainly not the Kraken. It is important Robb. You have to solemnly promise me before I divulge anything.”

Robb with a serious but sincere look on his face spoke up “I will vow on my Stark honour and swear
by to old Gods not to reveal anything you do not want me to.”

Jon smiled at the unconditional oath of his friend.
“I have a dog.” Jon started his story.

Robb looked confused. “So have I, several actually.”

“I’ve not finished”, Jon replied. “I hope you will believe me. So I have this dog, I named him Max. Well Max and I are sort of bonded.”

Robb frowned “Bonded?”

“Bonded.” Jon affirmed. “I can see through his eyes, I can even tell him what to do.”

“My dog loves me as well and obeys my commands.” Robb replied. What do you mean though when you say you can see through his eyes?”

“Well, I can see what he sees. Max is near the kitchen now. Shall I tell him to go inside and see what’s for dinner?”

“That’s no proof.” Robb retorted. “Someone could have told you what we’re going to eat tonight.”

Jon pondered the issue.
“Well, I can ask him to come over here and threaten to piss on your pants? Don’t worry. He will only lift his leg and do nothing more but bark and start licking your boots.”

“That’s also a command a dog can learn.” Now Robb was deep in thought trying to come up with an impossible assignment.

“Could you ask him to go to our bedroom? I know we left the door open this morning. Make him retrieve my blue pants? They should still be lying on top of my bed furs. If he can bring them here without you getting up from this bench, then I will believe you. Are you sure he is near the kitchen Jon?”

“I’m positive. Now let me concentrate.” Jon turned sideways so Robb couldn’t see his eyes and didn’t move for several minutes. Suddenly a dog could be seen sprinting toward them, something blue in his mouth.”

Ser Gerold studied Jon sternly. “Jon, come over here for a second.” He ordered. Jon obeyed leaving Max with Robb so they could get to know each other.

“Did you just do what I think you did?” Ser Gerold lifted his brow and stared accusingly at Jon.

“I did Ser.” Jon looked a bit intimidated.

“I discussed it with Lord Reed since Robb will be living here for some moons and I will still have to perform my daily mental exercises. Lord Reed decided it was better to tell him ourselves than to let him find out without us knowing. This way I could tell him up front how important it was that he would tell no one about it. Besides, Lord Reed said you can trust a Stark when you make him promise. And I did just that. Robb even swore upon his Stark honour.”

Jon looked a little smug now.

“You could have given me a heads up.” Ser Gerold grumbled.
“ Well I guess I should be grateful you didn’t prove it by letting him wet my boots.”
Jon grinned, all tension between them resolved. “You know, I almost did,” he teased and then ran away before the knight could retaliate.

When Jon returned to the bench where Robb was still playing with Max, Robb stated quietly. “I believe you and you can rest assured, I will tell no one. It is amazing though. Can you explain this some more later this evening in our bedroom before we go to sleep? I bet there is a story here.”

Jon looked relieved at the easy acceptance of this proof of his ‘weirdness’. “I’ll try to answer your questions. I don’t know if I would call it a story.”

Robb seemed satisfied with this answer. Suddenly he jumped up from the bench. “Come on Jon”, he said out loud. “Let’s go inside and write a message to uncle Benjen. We’ll write him that you’re invited to Winterfell sometime in the future. I’m sure he’ll do his best to be there. We can’t leave it to chance!”

“Great idea Robb, let’s go!”

Jon put his arm over Robb shoulder and the two boys headed toward the castle. Ser Gerold smiled and got up to follow them. It was nice to see his King this carefree.

Interlude 5: How Dany met Jon

Future glimpse

Daenerys was very happy, anxious, nervous perhaps, but very happy. A messenger had just come from the docks. His ship had arrived. Soon Aegon would be here. She would finally get to meet him in person. She called her Septa to join her in the sitting room and instructed the servants to prepare refreshments.

Daenerys was a princess, an exiled princess. She was born on Dragonstone in Westeros but had been whisked away by Targaryen loyalists when her family lost the Iron Throne during the Rebellion. Since then she had lived in Pentos hiding from the Baratheons, the house that now ruled the Seven Kingdoms.

Her earliest memories were of a modest house in Pentos with a red door. She and her brother had lived there with two protectors and a Septa, called Moelle. The latter had become more of a companion and teacher than a religious guide. Daenerys had learned of the Seven from her but was not really impressed by these so-called Gods. Life had been boring, money had been short and Ser Darry their main protector had been half blind and ailing.

But then Daenerys could clearly remember when things had changed for the better. First Ser Darry had started to get regular visitors. Then they had moved to a large mansion with strong walls and an iron gate. Guards and servants had been hired. Daenerys had received new gowns and some toys. When Ser Darry died, his replacement had already been there for more than a year. Ser Jorah Mormont was now the head of her guard. He became a trusted advisor and often told her about the Northern Kingdom where he was born.

Daenerys would have been very happy if her brother hadn’t gotten ill. Viserys was six years older
than her and constantly talking about moving back to Westeros. He had told her stories about the Rebellion and the ‘usurper’ as he called the current King of the Seven Kingdoms. He had told them to her over and over again. The stories had gotten more fanatical with every rendition. But then there came time her brother had been delirious constantly.

One day she had found him in the middle of burning his hand with a candle. He had raved like a madman about dragons and burning and they had had to give him milk of the poppy to get him to calm down and treat his burns. Ever since then his mental health had deteriorated.

The Maester had been obligated to keep him sedated the entire time. Each attempt to wean him of the medication and let him wake up had resulted in Viserys raving like a madman and burning himself. He seemed obsessed with fire. This went on for many moons until one day, his body had been too weakened by the constant drugging and inactivity and his heart had given out.

Daenerys could remember that day as if it was yesterday. She was truly alone in the world now. She had been depressed for some time but then the letter had come.

Daenerys had been twelve at the time. The letter had been addressed to her written by a boy who was twelve as well and who claimed to be her family. He told her that she was not alone in the world. He was her nephew and she also had an elderly relative living at the wall, a Maester Aemon Targaryen. There was a letter included from him as well.

The first letter was brought by a trusted messenger. Aegon had included an extra sheet that described a kind of code they could use to hide the real content of their future letters. Since he knew she was fluent in High Valyrian, he had devised a code they would use to encrypt their letters.

They would always combine two sentences. Write the first sentence in High Valyrian, the second sentence in the common Tongue. Then they would alter each word writing it backwards, for example ‘word’ became ‘drow’. The next step was mixing the first and the second sentences combining them into one sentence, keeping the words in the right order, alternating words from each sentence: the first word of the first sentence, the first word of the second sentence, then the second word of the first sentence, and so on. Daenerys thought it was a brilliant idea and she had fun coding her correspondence like that.

Ever since then messages were exchanged regularly between the two of them. Occasionally she would also receive a letter from Maester Aemon. Daenerys learned that Aegon lived incognito in Westeros under an alias ‘Jon Celtigar’. He was born Aegon Targaryen son of her brother Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark. The Starks were not ‘usurpers’ bent on destroying Targaryens.

Viserys had been wrong. Only King Baratheon and the Lannisters were looking for her and would kill her if they got the chance. Luckily they didn’t know that Aegon existed yet. Aegon was half Targaryen and half Stark and the Starks were instrumental in keeping him safe. She learned that the people who protected Aegon were also the ones that had been sending money here. They had always kept a close eye on her and Viserys. All the servants and guards that had joined them after her fifth nameday had been organised by them. Aegon had claimed his entourage had thwarted several attempts on her life, but had reassured her that they were confident she was safe for the time being.

If she still had had any doubt that he really was who he claimed to be, she was convinced when he started telling her about his two dragons. He even claimed to be in possession of another dragon egg and hoped that maybe it was destined for her. He had told her how he had felt straight away that two of the eggs were meant for him.

What he had felt exactly or how he had successfully hatched the dragon eggs he wouldn’t put into writing, not even in code. He would tell her only if she needed the information. She prayed the third
egg would respond to her but mostly she prayed for Aegon to stay safe until they could meet. She would be patient. For the first time since the death of her brother she had felt a sense of belonging again. She was not the last Targaryen.

Gradually the tone of the letters changed, Aegon sounded more confident no longer a boy, but a man. What he told her were no longer vague ideas. Aegon had started to tell her about their plans to overthrow the Baratheon King, claim the Iron Throne. They had enhanced their coded messages by substituting names and sensitive nouns by aliases. Unlike Viserys’ ramblings, her nephew’s plans made sense. He already had substantial support and had plans in motion to gather even more allies. Besides he had dragons which were healthy and growing well.

Then the letter arrived in which he announced he was planning a sea voyage and would finally be able to visit her. He had not hidden from her how much he looked forward to that. He had promised to be there within six moons at the latest. And so it had happened. A few weeks before her sixteenth nameday, he had sailed to Pentos.

And now she sat here in the sitting room, softly talking with Moelle, trying to make the time go faster somehow. She was doing her best to act normal and forced herself not to look out of the window too often. But when she heard the heavy iron gates open she couldn’t restrain herself any longer. She jumped up and almost ran to the window. She saw three men on horseback enter the courtyard and dismount. They didn’t linger but hastened themselves to the front door. And then a servant led him into the room.

Daenerys’ heart beat so loudly, she wondered if her Septa could hear it. A young man entered and looked around obviously looking for her. His eyes went wide when he saw her standing next to a Septa. Another man followed him inside, scanned the room and took up position next to the door. ‘Of course, a Targaryen Prince would not go anywhere without a guard.’

He bowed and she made a formal curtsy. Nobody had spoken yet.

Daenerys knew from his letters that he didn’t have the Targaryen colouring but the young man who stood before her was totally different from the image she had dreamed up when she read his letters. He had no resemblance whatsoever to her or Viserys. He also didn’t look like the few Westerosi she had encountered before.

At first glance he was a handsome young man, strong, lean, cute dark curls. He seemed all that she had hoped for, all that she had expected even. But what struck her was his personality. Although he had been nervous the first few seconds, the way he held himself was not the posture of a boy. Before her stood a young man, a confident young man. At least that was her first impression.

When her eyes met his warm dark eyes, matching the description of the Stark grey she had been told about, she had been struck with a sense of belonging. She knew instantly that he was her kin. She could drown in these sensitive, intelligent orbs staring warmly at her.

Moelle standing next to Daenerys smiled indulgently and did the honours. “My Lord, may I present to you Princess Daenerys Targaryen of House Targaryen, daughter of King Aerys II and Queen Rhaella. I am her Septa and go by the name of Moelle.”

The young man spoke up now “Prince Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar Targaryen. Your nephew greets you aunt, greetings to you too septa Moelle”. His eyes however never left her face and the welcoming smile that lighted his face made him even more handsome.
“Well met Aegon”, she smiled. “Please call me Daenerys. We are kin and the same age. Let’s forget that I am technically your aunt.”

“Thank you Daenerys. I will. And please call me Jon for now. Nobody calls me Aegon yet. I would probably look behind me to see whether there’s another person standing there if you were to call me that.” His smile grew even wider.

“Please have as seat”, Daenerys suddenly remembered she was the hostess here. “I will call for refreshments.”

And Aegon or rather Jon had sat down and they had started to get acquainted for real.

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The days had flown by. Her nephew had dedicated a lot of time to her. They had taken lengthy strolls in the gardens. Most of the time they kept their conversation light talking of non political topics, just enjoying this time to get to know each other, both glad they still had family that shared Targaryen blood.

During one of their last strolls Daenerys had built up the courage to broach a delicate subject.

“Jon, are you considering a marriage alliance in Westeros to gain more allies? Are you already promised to someone?

He had blushed and had taken some time to answer. He seemed tense when he finally started talking.

“I am trying to avoid this as long as possible. It is not always easy to stave off council from my loyal entourage, all of them being at least twice my age. My advisors have proposed several possible brides thus far. I have told them that they can bring up their suggestions and I will listen closely and consider them. However I have made it clear that in the end I will have the final say.”

Then Jon had relaxed again and had looked at her with that tempting smile that she knew well by now but still relished seeing it lighten his often serious features. He had leaned her way, his mouth close to her ear to make it seem as if he was going to tell her a big secret.

“Being the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, the One True King of Westeros, The Andals and the First Men, Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, He who has Dragons, must come with some perks, don’t you think so?” he had said mockingly.

And it had been her time to blush. Not because of this words, but because of the small puffs of his breath tickling her ear. They had made her feel warm inside.

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During the week he spent with her, Jon had introduced her to some of his travel companions. He was of course accompanied by a sort of Kingsguard but he had also brought some friends along.

They seemed a curious mix. There was Edric Dayne, future lord of Starfall, Samwell Tarly, a shy but seemingly a really close friend to Jon, then there was Gendry, a craftsman with an impressive physique but with an accent that betrayed his low origins. Jon however treated him with as much respect as his noble friends.

His guards also were a curious mix of personalities. Two were former Targaryen Kingsguards, although if you considered the fact that Jon, or rather Aegon was the rightful King, they were still
Kingsguards. The third one was a large rather ugly looking man with rough manners and an even rougher vocabulary going by the name of Sandor Clegane. Daenerys was amazed at the natural way Jon interacted with him and the respect the larger man seemed to have for Jon. It only made her esteem her nephew more.

It was evident that he was the leader of this strange group, it was his birthright. But it seemed that his friends and his guards truly esteemed Jon and that he had a natural bond with all of them. Her nephew would make a good sovereign.

All too soon it was time for Jon to leave. Their goodbye was affectionate. Jon had enfolded her in his arms and had held on to her for a long time. She had shed a few tears but they were happy, hopeful ones Daenerys had reassured him. She had said that now that she had seen him and heard his plans she finally believed she could go home soon.

And Jon had promised her. It would take them no longer than a year he had said with certainty. As soon as Dragonstone was freed from Stannis Baratheon, he would send a ship for her. Daenerys had nodded and smiled, even given him a quick peck on his cheek. Then he was gone.

Daenerys had not lied to him. There had been some happy tears amongst them. She looked forward to living in Westeros. She was determined to prepare herself for this new phase in her life. If she had it her way she would be an asset to her nephew instead of a burden. She would educate herself so she could be an adviser to him, perhaps even help him rule?

Anyway his considerate gifts would help her in this endeavour. Before Jon had left he had brought her two crates with several books. He told her that his friend Samwell Tarly had helped him with the selection. He had stressed that she only needed to read those she was interested in. It was important she believed they were gifts only meant to please her, to answer the many questions she had about her homeland and not disguised obligatory lessons. He had gazed in her eyes with such a kind and earnest look that she had no doubts whatsoever that he only had the purest intentions and it really was a thoughtful gift.

Several tomes contained the history of each of the Seven Kingdoms. There were books detailing all the Lords of the great Houses going back hundreds of years. One volume was dedicated to House Stark exclusively and described the known history of the former Kings of Winter going back almost ten thousand years ago. She had already read a small part of that one and had been riveted by the tale of Brandon the Builder. She couldn’t wait to read more.

Then there were books on geography, books on keeping books. She remembered his teasing voice when he had phrased it like that. It was actually more a guide for the castellan of a keep. There were binders containing religious texts, smaller volumes full of folk tales, songs and poems popular in Westeros, scrolls describing customs, clothing, court protocol.

But he had saved the best one for last. She had reverently touched the cover of the large tome Jon had carefully laid out on the table before her. Her fingers had followed the raised pattern of the tree headed dragon that was printed on the beautiful brown leather cover. She had been moved beyond words. It had been the first time she had hugged him. She wondered if she could read them all before it was time to go home.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter is the big reveal!
Jon knows something

Chapter Summary

Jon visits Winterfell and hears about his parentage.
Prince Oberyn also learns some things.

Chapter Notes

Rewrote this chapter several times. Hope it doesn't disappoint
I am aging Edric Dayne up a bit. I just wanted to create more friends for Jon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon had been enjoying his time at Winterfell. He had been here for two weeks now and soon they
would be heading over to the Wall and he would get to meet Maester Aemon with whom he had
been corresponding for several years now.

Ser Gerold and Ser Oswell had accompanied Jon on this trip. They had let their beards and hair grow
out and almost always wore helmets that left little visible of their faces. During meals in the great hall
they took up guard duty and ate in private afterwards. Nobody suspected they were anything other
than two loyal houseguards of Jon Celtigar, an insignificant lord of the Driftmark who had
befriended the son of Lord Stark.

Ser Arthur hadn’t appreciated being left behind but Ser Gerold had argued that Ser Arthur was the
most recognisable of the three of them. They were taking enough risks at it was. Howland Reed
however had placated Ser Arthur by telling him that the Gods had showed him in several green
dreams that the knight’s nephew Edric Dayne would someday be of great help to Jon. His
premonitions had convinced him that Ser Arthur could inform his closest living relatives that he was
alive if he took the necessary precautions.

Ser Arthur had not hesitated and had immediately sent out an invitation to the current lord of Starfall
supposedly to meet a lord Velaryon of the Driftmark to discuss possible trade relations. He had
picked a location halfway between Starfall and the Driftmark and in due time received the Lord’s
acceptance. A date in less than two moon’s time had been agreed upon. Ser Arthur had let the party
leave for Winterfell without complaining, a renewed spring in his steps.

To compensate for the knight they left behind, Ser Gerold had taken on an extra guard and that is
how Jon had met Sandor Clegane. It had been an experience. It wasn’t because of the burns,
although at first Jon had been self conscious when he looked straight at Clegane’s face. Clegane
noticing this had just grumbled that they didn’t fucking hurt any longer and Jon had been able to
ignore them soon after.

No, Jon was fascinated by the way Clegane talked and acted. Jon was used to the well mannered
knights who treated him with respect. Sandor Clegane was nothing like that. It seemed to Jon that
however much Clegane tried to reign in his coarse language when speaking with the twelve year old,
he somehow always fell back into his crude speech patterns. Sometimes Jon could also overhear little
outburst during conversations between the adults. And although Sandor Clegane was not a very talkative guy, Jon had already learned more curse words in these last few moons than in his entire existence.

Jon had come to like Sandor Clegane. Perhaps it was because he was so different from everyone else. He didn’t beat about the bush, he didn’t sugarcoat. He said few words but they conveyed more pertinent information than the lengthy debates of the high Lords. He dared to call a liar out. As he phrased it himself “he called their bullshit so they would stop winging”. Jon realised that if you could see past his rough manners Clegane was a guy you could rely on. Besides he was a formidable fighter. He would be a valuable addition to their group when they travelled to the wall. Jon had heard that the journey could be dangerous.

Sandor Clegane had arrived at the Driftmark where Jon was visiting his foster-grandmother. He had arrived with Captain Davos Seaworth and a Dornish Prince. The Prince had left after a sennight but Davos Seaworth had stayed on and Jon had come to enjoy his company. Davos, as Jon had been allowed to call him, reminded him a bit of Lord Stark if you considered the way he always had a pearl of wisdom to offer when Jon struggled with something. But where Lord Stark was formidable, Davos was an easy going, warm-hearted person, who always stayed very humble. He acted more like an affectionate father toward Jon and Jon had been delighted when it had been decided that Davos would accompany their small party to Winterfell.

It had been nice getting to know Robb’s sisters and brother and observe how they were exactly as Robb had described them. Arya had become their little shadow. One time he and Robb had sneaked out of the castle trying to avoid her company for once but it hadn’t taken much longer than half an hour or before she had found them shooting arrows in a small yard and had wanted to try it as well. Of course her little arms hadn’t been able to pull the string of the bow so Jon had helped her and with their combined effort they had hit the mark right in the centre, before Robb had been able to do so. Apparently by this little act Jon had earned her undying loyalty.

Their lively company had distracted Jon from his grief over the loss of Max. The little dog had gotten ill shortly after they had started their journey north. Jon had felt slightly sick as well and after a bad night full of disturbing dreams Jon had woken up next to the lifeless animal.

He had kept it together reminding himself of Lord Reed’s promise. Minutes before they had parted, Lord Reed had whispered the content of a premonition in his ear. He had foreseen that Jon would find a worthy mate during his travels and would create a bond with him stronger than anything he had ever experienced with Max. He had also given him the cryptic comment to find it in him to share when the time came.

Being at Winterfell also meant seeing Lord Eddard Stark again and he had been introduced to his lady wife, Catelyn Stark. She seemed nice but a bit formal, always greeting him rather stiffly when he encountered her in the hallway or in the great hall when he sat down for dinner. She always invited him to dine at the family table but he often excused himself murmuring a well-meant thank you and dined I the company of his own entourage. He saw she didn’t know what to make of that.

She clearly wasn’t at ease in his company. Jon was almost at the end of his stay here and still her behaviour was a combination of formal pride and apprehension. Somehow she seemed to go out of her way trying not to offend him. She enquired regularly if his room was adequate, if the food was to his liking, whether the servants saw to his needs timely and sufficiently, but always with a tense look on her face.
Jon took it all in stride. All in all he enjoyed his time at Winterfell immensely.

The only low point of his visit thus far had been Theon Greyjoy. Jon had immediately sensed that Theon was jealous of the easy camaraderie that had grown between him and Robb these last moons and that the Ironborn tried everything to sow discord between the two of them. He told Robb that Jon was a nobody compared to them, Theon being a Prince of Pyke and Robb a future Warden of the North. Besides, Theon had declared, he was a year older and much more interesting than a spoiled brat from an obscure island.

Things had only worsened when Robb had insisted on a joint sparring session. Theon hadn’t been able to beat Robb and had tried to swallow his pride and had boasted that Robb just had a lucky day. Then he had proceeded to take Jon on but he had been livid when Jon had disarmed him in less than two minutes. For once Jon wasn’t in a mood to be considerate. His opponent had tried his patience incessantly these last few days.

Greyjoy had insisted upon a rematch and had charged at Jon before Jon had had the opportunity to take up his starting position. Jon had done the only thing possible to prevent himself from getting hurt and had tumbled sideways making a complete rotation that had him back on his feet immediately. Theon hadn’t been able to stop his forward momentum and had hit the wall.

Ser Gerold who had been watching from the corner had hurried over to the boys ready to intervene but since Jon had saved himself the knight had directed all his angry energy at Theon. He had slapped the boy across the face, dragged him to the small storage space where the training equipment was kept and had locked him in there.

Theon had been punished. He had been sent to bed without dinner and had received a stern reprimand from Lord Stark the next morning. He was given additional chores to limit his time with the boys and was made to apologise in full view of the household to Jon for his dishonourable conduct.

After that awkward public scene, Jon did everything possible to avoid Theon. Jon didn’t want to cause trouble for Lord Stark, besides Jon would leave in a few days. He didn’t envy Robb who would have to share his home with the Kraken for several years.

But tonight Uncle Benjen would arrive before dinner. His ‘uncle’ would also accompany Jon on his trip to the wall.

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The next morning.

Jon was apprehensive. He knew something was going on. Last night during dinner Lord Stark had come up to the table where Jon had been talking animatedly with uncle Benjen, Davos Seaworth and Sandor Clegane. Uncle Ned had asked Jon to attend him in his solar the next morning after breakfast. He had looked rather grim and very serious doing so. Ever since that moment uncle Benjen seemed uneasy and his two loyal knights couldn’t look him in the eye. They had evaded his questions and had told him just to be patient, that Lord Stark certainly had a good reason to summon him. Only Davos and Clegane had kept acting normal.
Jon had not slept well and had dreamt that he was thrown out of the castle with only the clothes on his back. In his dream he had set off alone, cold and hungry. In no time he had gotten lost in the woods. He awoke in a sweat remembering the last part of his dream where a pack of wolves had encircled him. He wasn’t sure if they had threatened to attack him or if they had surrounded him for protection. At breakfast he ate very little. Still subdued by the memories of his nightmare he couldn’t help but worry about the reason behind the summons of Lord Stark.

When he entered the solar he was surprised to see that uncle Benjen was there as well. A bit reassured by that Jon sat down close to him and tried not to look too intimidated. “You asked me here My Lord.” He said respectfully.

“Yes Jon. I would like to speak to you about your parents, your family.” Lord Stark looked nervous.

Jon looked over at uncle Benjen. His uncle seemed apprehensive as well. “My parents are long dead Lord Stark. I do not understand.” Their behaviour was scaring him.

“Yes Jon, your parents are dead. The point is”, he paused, clearly searching for words.

Uncle Benjen turned his body toward Jon and took his hand. “Jon what we have to tell you will be difficult to hear. But know we did not want to disown you. Before you react to what we tell you, please know that I’ve loved you from the first day I saw you. I would have told the entire world that we were family if it would not have put you in danger.” Uncle Benjen’s eyes looked pleadingly into Jon’s. For the first time Jon realised their eyes were the same dark grey, Stark grey!

“I don’t understand”, Jon stammered totally of balance now. “Are you my father?” his gaze never wavered from his ‘uncle’ Benjen’s eyes. This was not what he had expected at all. He didn’t know what to think.

“Jon, I am your uncle, your uncle by blood. Lord Stark is your uncle as well. You are the son of my sister Lyanna Stark.” Benjen kept his voice as calm as possible and still held Jon’s hand in his.

Jon looked at him sceptically. “Your sister who looks like Arya and you missed so much when she died? I am a Stark by blood? Why would you not want to tell me that? I could have grown up with Robb at Winterfell. Oh, Robb and I are cousins! Does he know? Who knows? Why didn’t I know?” Jon was working himself up into a frenzy.

“Please Jon, listen”, his uncle Benjen, apparently his uncle for real, pleaded with him now.

“Jon, for the love I hold for you, please listen to me and let me tell you the entire story first. There is a lot more to it. Promise me you will let us tell you and promise me you will listen carefully. I know you are intelligent enough to consider all angles and not only your own perspective. Please keep in mind that all these years we have always had your best interest in mind. My brother and I have always considered you family and it has hurt us terribly that we couldn’t raise you ourselves. Please believe that above all else.” His uncle Benjen looked really desperate now.

Jon squeezed his hand reassuringly and tried to calm himself down. “I will try uncle.” And a watery smile crossed both their faces.

However it was Lord Stark who cleared his throat and proceeded to tell him a short version of the story starting with the Rebellion, the slaughter of the royal children, finding their sister with a baby
and concluded by revealing that Jon was actually a member of the Targaryen royal family and had a claim to the Iron Throne.

A long silence followed. Jon’s mind was reeling. His uncles waited patiently for Jon to react. The boy released his uncle’s hand, stood up and proceeded to walk up and down the small room. After a while he stopped, seemed to make up his mind and took his former place again, close to his uncle Benjen.

“Ser Gerold, Ser Oswell and Ser Arthur?”

“Are your Kingsguard, sworn to protect you.” Lord Stark completed Jon’s sentence for him.

Another silence, then Jon spoke up again. “You were fighting against my father’s armies during the Rebellion? Yet …” Jon hesitated to say more.

“The Rebellion was started over a lie.” Uncle Benjen intervened softly. "Things would have been so different had the realm been told that Lyanna loved Rhaegar and she had married him. Starks and Targaryens had been allies for almost three hundred years. But lies were spread, everybody overreacted, the Mad King murdered my father and brother. Things escalated from there. Jon, we are not your enemy, you are part of our pack. We are working behind the scenes to rectify the wrongs done to your family and we will help you get your throne back.”

Another long silence, this time Jon didn’t get up. He stayed perfectly still and appeared to work through all he was told. Finally he looked at Lord Stark.

“How … Why would I want the throne? Why can’t I just live with my family now that I know I have one? Surely after all these years nobody suspects anything any longer. And if I have learned anything from my history lessons, I do not look like a Targar … “, Jon interrupted himself.

“Maester Aemon! He is family as well! And Daenerys and Viserys! Do they know that I exist? Oh, we’re going to visit Maester Aemon! Does he know who I am?” Jon’s mind jumped from one conclusion to another.

“Jon, let’s all calm down.” Now it was Lord Stark who tried to placate Jon.

“There is a lot more to tell you. But to answer your first question, King Robert Baratheon is not a good king. The realm suffers. He doesn’t care about ruling, doesn’t care about his people. He only drinks and spends a lot of money. He is still searching for Daenerys and Viserys. He stills wants to kill them. He would want to kill you if he knew you existed. People are suffering.”

“Although it is your birthright to rule, the true motivation should be that you, that we want to help people. We do not want children to be murdered because they were born into a particular family. We want to protect Daenerys and Viserys. We want to protect the people, protect the weak, not dissimilar to the vows a knight makes. But to do all this, to be able to right these wrongs, you need power. The only way to have that kind of power is to stake your claim. But rest assured you won’t have to do it alone. It won’t happen overnight and we will all help you.”

Lord Stark studied his nephew closely. Reassured that he was listening intently he continued.

“The plan is to keep you safe. You have to stay hidden until you are old enough. In the meantime we prepare ourselves. We build a fleet, amass an army, forge alliances and give you the education you need. Raising you at Winterfell with your Kingsguard in tow would not have been safe. Trust me.
We had a heated discussion when I wanted to take you away from them at the Tower of Joy. We all had to compromise.”

“Why tell me now?” Jon asked. He took a deep breath and added “Can I call you uncle?” He looked at Lord Stark a hopeful expression in his grey Stark eyes.

“I would consider it an honour if you would call me Uncle Ned.” Lord Stark gave him a hesitant smile. “At the very least this would mean that you are not carrying too big a grudge against us.

“I’m trying to look at it from your point of view uncle Ned.” Jon was calmer now. “I am starting to realize that what you and uncle Benjen have been doing all these years could be considered treason and that you have been risking your lives all this time, even putting your entire family in danger.” I think I am not entitled to be resentful. I’m starting to think that I should be thankful instead.”

He turned to his uncle Benjen. “Especially to you uncle Benjen. If I am right, you have been doing nothing but travelling for my sake?” Jon looked warmly at his favourite uncle, a necessary distinction since he had more than one uncle now.

The man sat still close to him and took the boy’s hand in his once more. “It was my choice Jon. I would do it all again”, he stated simply, a relieved smile on his face now.

“Still”, Jon looked back at his other uncle, why now? Is it because we are going to visit Maester Aemon at the Wall? What is he a great-great-uncle of mine?”

“Something like that yes.” Uncle Ned started explaining. “If we are being honest, Maester Aemon was the one who insisted on telling you now. We would perhaps have waited a few years longer. Just to keep you safe, mind you. The more people who know, the way you would act, the way other people in the know would interact with you, it could all arouse suspicion. Someone could overhear. All reasons to wait a bit longer.”

“It isn’t because you think me still too young to handle this knowledge, because you do not trust me to be mature enough to keep this a secret?” Jon asked slightly upset.

His uncle Benjen tried to soften the mood again. “Jon, we do trust you. We only wanted you to have some carefree years first. Imagine if you had known earlier. Knowing your sense of duty …”, he trailed off but then resumed with more confidence. “Now that you know, will you still be able to forget everything and enjoy playing games with Arya without a care in the world?”

Jon sighed. “Perhaps you have a point there. Although, now that I know some things, I wish to know it all. Perhaps not everything right this minute. Gods know I need to think on this a bit. My parents caused the rebellion! They were the reason thousands died?”

“Jon, don’t overthink things now. Wait until you’re calmer. But I can perhaps reassure you some on account of your parents. We have reason to believe someone set them up. All those lies that were spread could not have been a coincidence. We are looking into it and have a suspect. And do not forget, the situation in the Seven Kingdoms was volatile to begin with, remember a mad King sat on the throne.”

“Let’s table this discussion for later, perhaps even sleep on it first?” Benjen refrained himself from hugging Jon, not wanting to destroy Jon’s composure. He sensed Jon would very likely fall apart the
moment Benjen offered more comfort. He just squeezed his hand once more.

“Alright, but in the next few days I want to be briefed thoroughly. I want to hear about all the plans you have been making in my name. I want to know who knows about me, who our allies are at this moment, who you suspect of foul play, what preparations you where talking about earlier.”

He looked straight into Lord Stark’s eyes now. “And I will want to be part of future discussions. If plans are being made for me, in my name, I will want to be able to have at the very least a say in them.”

Jon paused, a determined look on his face. “Also I will want to contact Daenerys and Viserys in Essos.“

Jon held up his hand when he saw that his uncle Ned wanted to interfere. “I know uncle. I won’t do anything without your approval and endanger my newly found family. We can discuss the best way to go about this together, but please know I consider this a priority.”

“We’ve seen to their comfort and safety Jon.” Uncle Benjen once more tried to appease him. “You won’t be disappointed to hear of the arrangements we have made for them. Let’s take a break now”, he tried once more. ‘Give each other some time to think on this in solitude. We could reconvene tomorrow morning when we’ve all calmed down a bit? This hasn’t been easy for you to hear, I know, but all this has taken a toll on us as well.”

Jon however had still one pressing question. “Before I go back to my room, before I will encounter other people, can you please tell me exactly who knows that I am a Targaryen? Of course for now I only mean of all the people that are here at Winterfell for the moment so I know how to act around them? The rest can wait.”

Jon hesitated. “And I would like to know if we can tell Robb?”

His uncle Ned was the one who replied. “Of all the people residing in Winterfell right now, the people in the know are: present company of course, my wife, and the two Kingsguards. Elsewhere, Lord Reed and Ser Arthur know as well.”

Jon looked pensive now. “Davos Seaworth, Sandor Clegane do not know?”

“They know some, suspect more perhaps. They will probably be the first to be let in on your identity now that you know.”

Jon nodded.

Lord Stark still had more to say. “The rest of this little list can wait as you stated. Now about who we will bring into our circle, let’s discuss this during the coming days. I would ask you not to tell Robb anything yet. I promise I will hear your arguments tomorrow and we can try to compromise but bear in mind that Robb will have to live in close proximity with Theon and Theon is an enemy. If Robb should slip up or Theon should overhear you talking, he would not hesitate to sign our death sentences by betraying us to the Crown.”

Jon saw his uncle Ned slump back in his chair clearly worried for his heir and family. “I understand uncle.” His voice sounded solemn as he continued. “I promise once more that for now I won’t take any decisions or act without talking it over with you two first. I respect the risks you have already taken for me and will not put you in additional danger if I can help it. Please trust me.”
His uncle Ned stood up and put a hand on Jon’s shoulder. “I am proud of you nephew. Let me in turn promise you the same. I will not make any major decisions anymore without discussing them with you first.”

Then to Jon’s amazement the proud Warden of the North knelt before Jon. “I will shield your back and keep your counsel and give my life for yours if need be my King. I swear it by the Old Gods.”

Jon looked uneasy. “Please stand uncle. I thank you and I vow that I shall ask no service of you that might bring you dishonour.”

He was glad the formal response had flowed naturally from him and mentally thanked his Maester for familiarising him with court protocol.

His uncle Benjen now proceeded to kneel in front of him.

“Please uncle Benjen”, Jon pleaded. “Isn’t it way too early for this?”

“Jon”, uncle Benjen said a devoted look in his eyes. “I’ve sworn my sword to you when you were but a babe of a few moons old and I have served you loyally ever since. I would like to make it official.”

“It would be my honour uncle”, Jon replied completely awed by the steadfast allegiance of his favourite uncle.

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Ser Oswell saw a clearly disturbed Jon return to his guest room at Winterfell. He immediately ordered Sandor Clegane to fetch Ser Gerold. Upon his arrival Ser Oswell ordered Clegane to stay outside and guard the door. Together they entered the room where Jon was brooding before the window.

“My King”, Ser Gerold started hesitantly, “I understand you must be shocked and have a lot of questions for us.”

“I am king of nothing yet.” Jon retorted bitterly. “Perhaps I never will be, or will want to be.”

“To us you always will be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, my K…, Prince.”, Ser Gerold said. “Do not take any decisions now. Wait until you have had time to look at this from all angles. You could do so much good for the people of Westeros.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.” Jon sighed. “Why must it be me though, I’m hardly twelve years old. I just had to watch a powerful grown man fall to his knees before me and swear me his fealty. That is a heavy burden to take on, you know. It seems he makes me responsible for the entire North!”

“Not yet My King, he swore to help you, support you if you wanted to claim your birthright. The rest would follow later, when you are ready.” Ser Gerold tried to reassure the boy.

Ser Oswell spoke up. “We have been sworn to your service since before you were born my King. Please let me make the gesture before you, openly, it would mean the world to me.”

How was Jon to refuse these loyal knights? He nodded his assent.
Both men drew their swords and got to their knees. Once the solemn official part over, Jon tried to
lift everyone’s spirits.

“Does that mean I get to order you around, instead of you me?” he tried to joke but failed since both
men were taken back by his words and were looking at each other to determine who would react.

It was Ser Gerold who carefully formulated a response. “We are sworn to obey your command my
King. And we will. When it concerns matters of state, ways to go forward, we will only be advisers.
When it concerns matter of safety, we hope you will not disregard our orders unless absolutely
necessary. But when we take on our role as instructor, for instance during a training session, we will
need to be able to exert our authority. We will need you to push on when you’re tired and we will
not obey your orders to end the training or omit exercises you loathe. You must trust that we will
always keep your wellbeing in mind, but if you do not agree with this, we might as well stop training
you at this point.”

Ser Oswell nodded at Ser Gerold and both looked at Jon for a reaction.

“Well, Jon said after thinking this through, “I think that I can agree on that for now. However there
will come a time that I will choose how hard and how often I practice. But I agree that that is still
years away.”

He then looked firmly at both his Kingsguards. “Here is my first command. Do not use the title My
King yet, if you want to pay me homage, I’ll reluctantly agree to My Prince for the moment but
would ask you to use it as little as possible. I do not feel I have earned any title yet. Let me get used
to the idea at first. I need some time to come to terms with this. Please allow me this.”

“I would however like to hear your version of my parent’s role before and during the Rebellion.
Perhaps you can tell me tomorrow or the day after at the latest?”

“Of course My Prince” Ser Gerold answered. “I presume you would want us to leave you alone for
some time now?”

“I do, thank you Ser Gerold, Ser Oswell. But before you go, allow me to express my gratitude to you
both from the bottom of my heart for your unwavering loyalty to my House.”

Ser Oswell’s eyes grew wet. “My Prince” He bowed and both men left the room.

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The next morning Jon and both his Stark uncles once more held a private meeting after breaking their
fast. A lot of things were discussed. Then Jon mentioned the subject of his Targaryen relatives.

“I have thought it over uncle. I will wait until I have spoken to Maester Aemon. I hope he can advise
me on this. Uncle Benjen told me he hears from them from time to time. I’ll ask him for a safe way to
contact them.”

Both uncles nodded their agreement.

“On the subject of Robb however, I understand your reasoning that he is too young, I really do. I
know it first hand.”

Jon frowned. “However, if I decide to pursue my birthright, I will need his unwavering loyalty. How
will I gain that if I don’t trust him in the first place?” A hand gesture stopped his Uncle Ned from speaking.

“I think I should take no decisions whatsoever until after I have talked with my uncle Aemon. He has lived through several generations of Targaryens. He has seen good and bad monarchs. I certainly want to hear his reasons for giving up his birthright.”

“When I know all the facts and I have had time to decide what to do, we will discuss this again and we will agree on the correct time to bring Robb into our conspiracy, if there still is the necessity for one.”

Jon kept up his monologue. “I would like to have your consent to tell Davos Seaworth and Sandor Clegane at my own discretion. I do not think I can stall this for long. They belong to my immediate circle. I need to be able to trust these people with my life. I can not do that when I fear they will turn on me because they are resentful when they learn by accident and think I didn’t find them trustworthy enough. What’s more, it is only fair that they should know what’s at stake, when they are the ones risking their lives.”

“I see you have thought this through”, his uncle Ned reluctantly agreed. “I trust you to handle this with care. Be sure your guards are near you when you tell them though. You always need to be prepared for the worst. That way it mostly never happens.” A tiny smile crossed his uncle’s face.

They moved to safer topics after that. Uncle Benjen started talking about the logistics of the coming trip to the Wall.

***

Jon tried to hold it together his last days at Winterfell. He spent as much time as possible with Robb and half of the time this included Arya whether they intended it or not. He knew it could be a long while before they were able to see each other again. He would miss Robb terribly.

“We’ll compete on who can write the longest letters.” Robb had tried to joke but the look on his face had belied his tone.

“Uncle Benjen’s luggage will consist mostly of scrolls and he will hardly have any room in his saddle bags for his own belongings when he travels between us.” Jon had tried to continue the joke.

He did his utmost to act as if nothing was the matter so Robb wouldn’t ask questions Jon would so very much like to answer him but wasn’t allowed yet. It took all of his mental strength.

As a consequence Jon cut their alone time short with some lame excuse of necessary preparations. He really needed some time to mentally recuperate from the effort of hiding his inner turmoil.

His last evening at Winterfell, Robb had somehow known where he had hidden himself away and had found him in the middle of his brooding. His friend has simply taken the seat next to him, put his arm around Jon’s shoulders and had pulled him into him. They had stayed like that for what had seemed like hours to Jon, not talking just silently supporting each other, both of them aware they had to part in the morning.

Robb probably knew something was bothering his friend but wisely choose not to ask and to let Jon decide whether he would tell him. They parted for the night with one last hug. Jon knew he would
never be as close to another friend as he was to Robb. If only he could tell him he was family.

***

The next morning the travellers for the Wall had assembled in the courtyard. Davos saw Robb and Arya standing in the front row of the sending off party at the opposite site of the space. Both were struggling to hide their emotions. Until the last moment Robb had tried to persuade his father to let him come along but Lord Stark had not relented.

The latter stood quietly beside his family giving of the impression that the Warden of the North had come out to pay his respect to his brother and travelling companions who were about to leave for the Wall. However, Davos observed that Stark’s eyes rested on Jon to the exclusion of all else.

Jon waved one last time at Arya and Robb, nodded to Lord Stark and urged his horse onward. The small caravan followed him at a sedate pace. Jon rode upfront between his two so-called houseguards who wore similar uniforms, always donning their helmets. Sandor Clegane, Benjen Stark and Davos himself made up the second row.

They were followed by a wagon carrying supplies for the wall and several Stark houseguards. The end of their small procession was made up by a few brothers of the Night’s Watch with a dozen new recruits. The party from the Night’s Watch had arrived at Winterfell just in time to join their excursion. They were a welcome addition that allowed Lord Stark to keep more of his houseguards at Winterfell than initially planned. Davos would escort Jon’s small entourage back to the Driftmark by boat. His crew would complement Jon’s protection for that stretch of their journey.

Ser Davos had been watching Jon closely these last few days. Jon was a quiet intelligent boy who was good with people. Davos had immediately taken a liking to the young orphan. When Davos had arrived at the Driftmark with Prince Oberyn and Sander Clegane, it hadn’t taken him long to connect the dots.

He had counted back the time and quickly realised that Jon was the little baby he had sailed from Dorne to the Driftmark all those years ago. His three faithful shadows were a dead giveaway. Many years back he had seen through their disguise. He had known they were no farmers returning to their homestead but had clearly recognised three noble warriors, knights perhaps. It had been a strange group. Davos had recognised Howland Reed since his wife and Lord Reed’s wife were cousins. The combination however of a Northern Lord, three knights in disguise and a baby was suspicious.

But discretion had been a condition of getting the assignment and Davos had never spoken about this to anyone. Apparently in doing so he had earned the good graces of his clients because they had used his services frequently over these past ten years. And now they had asked him to work for them exclusively. Davos had not hesitated. The entire situation had intrigued him for years.

Besides he had grown fond of the boy. The young orphan welcomed his company and Davos couldn’t help but feel protective towards Jon, these last few days even more than ever. He was not blind. He had noticed that something had happened to Jon during that meeting with Lord Stark. Jon had kept more to himself and could often be found brooding in some corner. Robb was the only one who could get him to lighten up and share an activity together.

But that was not the only change Davos had noticed in Jon after that fateful morning. Jon seemed more confident somehow, certainly in his interactions with Lord Stark. Where before Jon had been
very deferential to Lord Stark, even a bit intimidated, he now actively sought out Lord Stark’s company and initiated their conversations. Davos had been astounded to see that the proud Warden of the North never turned the boy away and always gave him his full attention.

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Davos observed Jon installing his belongings into a small tent. The boy looked exhausted and a bit sad. Davos decided to offer to keep him company. It was clear that the boy could use a sympathetic ear. And since Davos couldn’t go and fetch Robb as he had secretly done when they were still at Winterfell, he decided to do the next best thing.

In the meantime, Jon had installed himself by a small fire and seeing Davos hesitate, invited the older man to keep him company.

“Are you warm enough Davos? Have you ever been so far north?” Jon asked when Davos had found a comfortable sitting place close to him. Jon had put a piece of meat on a stick and was holding it over the fire.

“Not over land, no.” Davos replied. “But I have sailed to Eastwatch a few times and I can tell you, at sea the winds make the cold temperatures even more biting. These old bones are used to a lot, you know. I can handle it. You need not worry about me.” Davos smiled at Jon

“That smells delicious. I think I will roast some myself.” Davos made a move to stand up and head toward the supply wagon but Jon halted him.

“I have an extra portion right here. You can take that. The piece that I am cooking now will be sufficient for me.”

Davos sat back down, prepared the offered piece of meat and started roasting it. He noticed the two knights sitting a few feet away around their own fire, seemingly engrossed in conversation but alert and taking in each movement Jon was making. He focussed his attention back to the boy.

Jon apparently was studying him as well. “Davos, why are you travelling to the Wall? Do you have business dealings with the Night’s Watch? Will you travel back with us or will we have to part company?”

Davos didn’t mind telling Jon. “I was hired by Lord Reed who acts on behalf of your entourage to join your journey to the Wall and I will also be the one to convey you safely back to the Driftmark by ship afterwards.”

Davos had chosen his words carefully. He wanted Jon to realise that Davos knew that Jon was at the centre of this strange excursion. A young boy who could hardly be older than eleven or twelve namedays had no business at the wall. Davos had had his suspicions all these years ago but current events confirmed that he was on the right track. He had already been able to fill out several gaps in his theories.

He saw Jon slump his shoulders and wondered if he had said the right thing. He moved a bit closer to Jon and tried to help the boy.

“Are you all right Jon? You seem troubled these last few days. Has anyone been a nuisance to you? Is there anything I can do to help?”

Davos was close enough so he could whisper these words. Jon would still be able to hear them over
the crackling of the fire. Out of the corner of his eye Davos noticed Benjen Stark approach but the two knights signalled Stark to let Jon and Davos be. Benjen Stark complied and joined the two knights instead.

Jon didn’t seem to mind these questions and repositioned himself slightly. His shoulders were almost touching Davos’ arm. It seemed he welcomed Davos’ effort to comfort him.
“I’m not completely fine yet, but I’m getting there. I just got some distressing news about my parents. I am still trying to make sense of it all.”

“I think your meat is well done.” Davos warned Jon and saw the boy divert his attention to the food. Jon started eating. An easy silence fell between the two of them. Davos waited until Jon had finished his meal before he resumed their conversation.

“I will not pry Jon. You tell me, or you don’t tell me. You decide. But know that I’m here if you want to talk. Sometimes talking about things makes you feel better, gives you a clearer perspective.” Davos tilted his head and smiled at Jon.
“Or I can always distract you with a silly tale if you prefer. I happen to know a few more since travelling with the extravagant Prince Oberyn.”

Davos stopped when he noticed that Jon had tears in his eyes.
“Or I can sit here in silence, just keep you company,” he added quietly.

Jon leaned against Davos looking for physical support.
“Just sit here with me for a while” he whispered. “And thank you Davos. As soon as I will be able to tell you more, I will. For now, know that I am grateful for your company and value your advice.”

Davos put his arm around Jon’s shoulder in an effort to offer some comfort, unknowingly imitating Robb’s gesture from the night before. Somehow this memory made Jon feel better. They stayed like that until it grew too dark and everyone retired to their tents.

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The next morning Davos approached Benjen Stark. “Jon’s troubled. I hope Lord Stark has done right by the boy?”
He saw Benjen Stark swallow. Davos waited patiently for a reaction. Benjen Stark seemed not to know how to respond.

“Jon is very dear to our family. We consider him part of our pack. We will always love and protect him.” He finally answered.

Davos nodded. “He is easy to love”, he confirmed and walked over to where the horses were grazing.
When he looked towards Jon’s tent he saw Benjen Stark had joined the boy and was hugging him.

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Davos saw the sun’s reflection in the large structure of ice that came into view once they had left the
last trees behind. It seemed they would reach Castle Black today. The journey had been uneventful. They had encountered no thieves, no Wildlings and there had been no attacks of wild beasts. Even if Davos had laid eyes on the Wall before, it remained a majestic view.

Davos relished seeing the awe in Jon’s eyes. The boy appeared relaxed, content. Jon’s mood had improved gradually over these last two weeks on the road. Perhaps this long trip on horseback had been just what he needed.

His close companions had clearly sensed this and had given Jon enough solitary moments to work through whatever burden that had been placed on his shoulders. They would often ride in a protective formation with the two knights up front Jon occupying the second row, Davos, Benjen and Sandor Clegane behind him closely watching his back. They mostly allowed Jon to make the first move and the choice of conversationalist when he was ready for company.

But what delighted Davos the most was that no matter what problem Jon struggled with, the confident attitude Jon had begun to adopt during his last interactions with the Stark family hadn’t wavered. He had seen the youngster mature before his eyes. Davos was also glad to see him lighten up and make jokes with the men. Jon could strike up an amiable conversation with anyone, be it a Lord or a lowly Night’s Watch recruit. Everyone seemed to appreciate Jon’s company.

Davos focussed his attention back on the Wall. He thought he had heard the sound of a horn blast. Benjen Stark moved his horse closer to Davos. Clegane followed suit.

“It seems they have spotted us already.” Benjen told the both of them.
“They will send out a party to escort us.”

And he was right. Half an hour later, a party of four men in black furs joined them and guided them along the last few miles and through the gates of Castle Black.

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Jon’s eyes took in the wooden structure that was Castle Black. It was larger than he had imagined even though uncle Benjen had told him about the renovations that had taken place these last few years. He knew that it now housed more than a thousand men in relative comfort. The guest quarters they were assigned looked clean and functional.

Jeor Mormont had welcomed them all but Jon had noticed immediately how the man had looked at him with a wary eye. The lord Commander had questioned his uncle Benjen’s sense in allowing such a young boy to visit here, the Wall being no pleasure park being his exact words. Mormont’s voice had boomed over the caravan so everyone had been able to hear the harsh words. Jon hadn’t known where to look.

Uncle Benjen however had calmly reached into his saddle bag and removed a scroll. Mormont had accepted it and read it on the spot. The man had granted them entrance without another word.

Later in their rooms, Uncle Benjen had explained to his nephew that the scroll contained the polite request of the Warden of the North to allow Jon Celtigar access to Castle Black. He motivated his request by stating that Jon Celtigar was a good friend of his son an heir and that the boy had been working diligently on a translation of an old Valyrian diary and would appreciate their Maester’s assistance. Lord Stark had stressed he would consider it a personal favour and had reminded the
Lord Commander of the continued support the North gave the Night’s Watch.

Jon had been introduced to Maester Aemon at dinner. There had been no opportunity to exchange more than a formal greeting but he had been granted a meeting with the old Maester the next day in the afternoon. Maester Aemon still had to attend to his duties as Maester of the Watch first. Jon had understood but he was a bit disappointed all the same. He really was impatient to meet the first member of his birth father’s family.

He went to bed early that night and dreamt of a large maze. Daenerys was beside him and he saw himself pushing a strange chair that had two wheels instead of four legs. They were frantically making their way through the maze. He realised they were searching for Viserys but couldn’t find him, no matter how hard they tried. Jon awoke, a lingering fear remaining from his dream. Were his aunt and uncle really safe in Essos?

He tried to shake these ominous thoughts. He got up and readied himself to go find his companions and break their fast together. The sooner he started his day and found some activity to keep busy, the quicker it would be time for the meeting with his great-great-uncle Aemon.

He decided to join a training session of the new recruits after he had eaten.

Interlude6: An unlikely alliance

Oberyn was debating what exactly to tell his brother. His mission had been successful and he had all his answers. Only, he couldn’t share everything with his brother. He had been sending regular reports to his brother at Sunspear these last few years. Sometimes even briefing him personally and enjoying a few moons at home, a necessary reprieve from his years of travelling.

The first item of real importance he had learned was that the Targaryens across the Narrow Sea were safe and comfortable. Prince Doran had given him permission to use Dorne’s resources should the royal children be in need, but they clearly were not necessary.

Oberyn had gone straight to the best source of information without travelling to Essos. He had visited Varys in Kingslanding. Not an official visit to the Crown, he would delay that as long as possible. Never would still be to soon for him! He had stayed in a luxurious brothel near the town walls and tried to make his presence obvious to some children he suspected were Varys’ little birds.

He felt safe taking this step. He would reveal no secrets if he betrayed his interest in the wellbeing of Viserys and Daenerys. They were family, related to the Dornish by marriage. So he had had no qualms in questioning the Master of Whisperers about this.

Varys had been more than willing to cooperate. His little birds had informed him of Prince Oberyn’s whereabouts and Varys had not hesitated in establishing contact.

“I had initially set them up in a modest house in Pentos, my Dornish friend.” Varys told Prince Oberyn. “I even sent several Targaryen loyalists their way. However, they no longer need my support. My little birds and spies across the Narrow Sea have informed me that the two royal children have been moved to a grander location.”

Prince Oberyn had frowned at this. “And who exactly is taking care of Elia’s good family?”

Varys had kept his surprise hidden and had relayed his second theory, the first one obviously erroneous now Oberyn had revealed that Dorne wasn’t behind this.

“Mind you”, he had warned Prince Oberyn upfront, “what I am going to tell you are only strong
suspicions. I have no proof but I suspect that the three former Kingsguards who disappeared without a trace could be behind it. I am still trying to sniff out how they are funding the entire operation. I have some vague clues that lead to the North but not enough proof to go on to be sure this intelligence is reliable.”

His jaw shifted slightly before continuing. “I haven’t been able to get my little birds to infiltrate the new household of the Targaryen children but somehow this is a good thing. It reassures me their safety is being taken seriously. I have one big worry however. My little birds’ latest reports mention that they are only catching glimpses of Daenerys. There seems to be no real proof that Viserys still resides in Pentos.“

Prince Oberyn had thanked Varys for the information and said he would investigate further and vaguely promised to send word to Varys if he learned anything substantial.

Upon learning from his contacts in Essos that the Prince had succumbed to an illness, he had once more conferred with Varys. Eventually both were reassured that there had been no foul play. The Prince’s death was just a tragedy but not an uncommon one. Sadly, children dying before they reached adulthood, was not an uncommon event.

It had been years now since he started out on this quest. His investigation currently focussed on Benjen Stark. Oberyn had investigated the North’s influence in the increased support of the Night’s Watch.

In Essos, he had also seen first hand the large shipments of glass being shipped north. A more important detail that had caught his eye was that this cargo was transported in northern vessels! He hadn’t realised the North had a fleet? Scrutinising the ships, he saw they all seemed in good repair. Hells, he would even go so far as to guess that most of them were on their maiden voyage or had not encountered much rough weather yet.

Even without personally venturing into the North, Oberyn had found more clues that something was up in that Kingdom. In every port he visited there were northern ships present. And when he encountered Benjen Stark for the second time in that year in an opposite corner of the realm compared to where he had first seen him, he began to track the Northerner’s movements. When he witnessed Stark meeting a man Oberyn recognised as one of the messengers of the Targaryens in Essos, he knew this was no longer a coincidence. Oberyn remembered that the Mountain had been shipped to Dorne on a Northern vessel. The name “Manderly” had been mentioned. He also remembered Varys’ suspicions.

Oberyn had not yet informed anyone of this, neither his brother nor Varys. He wanted to get to the bottom of this first. He didn’t want to make a fool of himself. There was still a minor possibility that he had this wrong and Benjen Stark was nothing more than an agent travelling a lot for the Night’s Watch. After all, his theory that the North was building up strength to declare their independence, was mere speculation. He had no real proof yet.

He based his theory on the fact that relations between King Robert and the Warden of the North had soured. But why would they support the Targaryens? Were they planning to help them back on the throne? It didn’t make sense. Why not declare the North independent and themselves Kings of Winter again? He knew he was still missing something. So he had decided he needed more intelligence and had kept silent.

Then there was still the fact that he was making no headway in his search for Tywin Lannister. His extensive travels had given him no clues whatsoever of the Lord’s whereabouts.
Almost a year after the Greyjoy Rebellion had ended, he had almost decided to give up and head back home. This event had crushed the most important foundation of his conspiracy theories. Bards were singing song of the brave warriors that had defeated the barbarian Krakens. They always praised how valiantly Baratheons and Starks had fought side by side victorious once more. This time they had defeated the Ironborn. Apparently King Baratheon and the honourable Ned Stark had reconciled.

Oberyn had already made arrangements for a ship to take him home when he had been approached. He saw through the thin ruse of opening up trade negotiations between Dorne and the Driftmark immediately. He knew the Driftmark was a place Benjen Stark visited often. Most probably it was his secret base of operations for whatever they were up to.

He eagerly accepted the invitation and took heart in the thought that he had been on the right track all along. He had real hope now that he was on the verge to find out what the Starks were planning and how it involved the royal children in Essos. He told his captain to change their initial destination and headed for the Driftmark instead.

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All the years of speculation and inventing theories had not prepared him for Jon. Oberyn had been welcomed by Benjen Stark who had been at the harbour when Oberyn’s ship docked at the small island. Together they had travelled the few miles to a small settlement. They had kept to small talk during their short journey on horseback.

It was still a few hours before dinner when they had entered a courtyard where a knight was teaching a young boy how to fight. Although they were training with wooden swords, the knight was in full armour, complete with helmet. The boy, he could be no more than eleven years old, was dressed up in boiled leathers and his face was also hidden by a helmet. He seemed an apt student and Oberyn was entranced by his elegant footwork. ‘He would easily adapt to our Dornish fighting techniques’, Oberyn couldn’t help but thinking.

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“Uncle Benjen! You are back!” The boy hugged Stark affectionately.

Oberyn saw the obvious regard Stark had for the boy as well.

‘Uncle?’, Oberyn couldn’t help but wondering.

But then it happened. The boy took of his helmet and shook out his dark curls. Although Oberyn saw the dark grey Stark eyes something in his face, perhaps his cheekbones, his chin, the way the boy moved, seemed familiar.

‘Did Benjen Stark have a bastard, one with Southern blood?’ Oberyn senses were on full alert. He was sure now it was all about the boy.

He studied Benjen Stark who met his eyes wearily. Then he looked over to the knight who had removed his helmet as well. ‘It was Ser Arthur Dayne! Of course, how could he not have recognized
the fighting style of his former friend? Hells, he should have recognized it in the way the boy had fought as well.’

He almost stumbled and didn’t know how to act. ‘Ser Arthur Dayne, was alive. He was in Westeros and was connected to this boy how? The boy was a Stark, if Ser Arthur Dayne was his family as well, it could be through his mother’s blood that he was a Stark. Lyanna’, he thought and then the next idea struck him and he staggered an sat down not caring if the ground was wet or whether he soiled his clothes.

‘Rhaegar! Ser Arthur was protecting Rhaegar’s offspring, a child with Lyanna Stark, a royal bastard, a Blackfyre!’

Both Stark and Ser Arthur were looking at him apprehensively. Both had their hands on the pommel of their swords. He noticed his erstwhile friend did not carry Dawn.

“Prince Oberyn?” Ser Arthur handed him a drink.

“I know it is a shock. But I am alive, have been all this time. For the sake of the esteem we both had for Rhaegar, will you let us explain?”

Oberyn looked around searching for the boy. It seemed they had ushered him somewhere else, safe from the possible threat that Oberyn presented now that he suspected who he could be. “The boy is Rhaegar’s spawn? You want to put a bastard on the throne?” Oberyn spit out. He still wasn’t a hundred percent sure. He watched both men, studying their reactions carefully.

Stark’s eyes had darkened with a murderous expression on his face and he had stepped closer to Oberyn. He was about to give an angry retort when Ser Arthur stepped between the two of them.

“Best get somewhere private before everyone hears what we are talking about. Prince Oberyn, would you be willing to hand over your weapons? All of them.” He added after Oberyn had given him his sword and one dagger.

Frustrated Oberyn looked at the both of them but then proceed to somehow pull another four daggers from his person. Ser Arthur scanned him thoroughly and asked.

“Can you give me your word of honour that you are not carrying any other objects that can harm the boy?”

Oberyn looked at him defiantly “Will you be satisfied with my word of honour? I solemnly swear that I won’t harm anyone while staying on this island? Unless I have to defend myself of course,” he added as an afterthought.

“I have been very compliant. I haven’t been this defenceless amongst strangers in a long time. Put yourself in my shoes? Would you want to be completely unarmed amongst strangers?” he grumbled.

Ser Arthur laughed, breaking the tension. He patted Oberyn’s shoulder. “You? Defenceless? Even unarmed my Prince, I am well aware you are far from defenceless. Besides, we are no strangers. We are former friends, possibly future allies.”

He helped Oberyn on his feet and they walked towards the small cottage where the three knights had lived many years.

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A long discussion ensued. First Oberyn had been infuriated.
“Rhaegar’s annulled his marriage? He took another wife?!”

“He didn’t change the succession. Elia’s son was still going to be first in line of the succession. He had it written out, signed by witnesses. Elia agreed.” Ser Arthur had argued and told him there was proof.

“We have correspondence in our possession between Rhaegar and Maester Aemon at the Wall, written proof that your sister had been consulted and had approved of the idea. Apparently she had been scared that she would not have survived another pregnancy and would continue to live with Rhaegar and raise their royal children together. Targaryens were known to do things like that.”

Oberyn’s temper had softened and he seemed more willing to listen. He had asked to see one of these so called letters and Ser Arthur had procured one, handing it over reluctantly and keeping a close eye on Prince Oberyn.

“The scrolls signed by the High Septon containing the annulment and wedding are safely stored in a secret place in the North.” He added after Oberyn had returned the letter to him.

“Why call the boy Aegon though, who calls his second son after his own dead child?” Oberyn had sighed. “I don’t know if I can call him that.”

“We think it was not Rhaegar’s doing. He was dead by the time Lyanna gave birth. He knew she was with child but I do not think they discussed names. Or if they did, perhaps Lyanna changed their original choice after learning of the death of his two firstborns? It was probably her way of honouring her husband’s murdered children. If nothing else, we think it further proof that both parts of Rhaegar’s family had been on good terms with each other.” Ser Arthur completed his explanation.

At the end of their talk, Oberyn was reconciled with what he had learned. He was glad that none of the stories circling about the missing Kingsguards had been true. They were alive and had retained their honour.

He had congratulated the Starks on their conniving plot for neutralising Tywin Lannister. If anyone else had told him, he would not have believed them. ‘And here I thought the Starks were the most honourable House in the Seven Kingdoms. It seems they are the most devious. To get away with all this scheming and still have such an upstanding reputation! I wonder if Eddard Stark still sleeps well at night?’

How he felt about the boy however, he was not sure yet. He had agreed to stay at the Driftmark for a week and take this time to observe the little Prince without raising his suspicion.

Oberyn had been warned that the Prince still did not know his real origins. He would be formally introduced to Jon Celtigar at dinner where he could also get the opportunity to reacquaint himself with Ser Gerold.

Eddard Stark had been right in his predictions. Oberyn did like the idea of thwarting the Baratheon-Lannister alliance and had easily agreed to keep Prince Doran out of the loop for now, already relishing the moment he could show his brother that acting yielded better results than this passive approach his elder brother always relied upon.

He couldn’t help but soften upon hearing their arguments that the boy was a half brother to Elia’s children and that Oberyn would have done the same to keep his kin safe had he been given the
chance. Babies were innocent of the circumstances of their birth.

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It was a sunny day and Prince Oberyn was aroused from his sleep by the sound of arrows hitting a wooden target. The position of the sun that streamed its light from high up through his little window made him realise it was almost the middle of the day. ‘No wonder I overslept’, he muttered to himself. ‘A man could get drunk from less.’ He hurried through his morning ablutions quickly broke his fast and joined the men outside in the training yard.

Jon had just finished his target practice and was sitting down drinking some water. He stood politely when he saw Oberyn Martell approach.

“Did you sleep well Prince Oberyn?” The boy tried to open the conversation.

“Late enough, it seems.” Oberyn tried a jovial tone. He was curious to get to know the boy Ser Arthur had raved about last night. Oberyn had only been able to exchange courtesies with him during the evening meal the day before.

He saw Jon struggle to find another topic of conversation.

“What is your weapon of preference if you spar Prince Oberyn?” Jon asked after a moment.

“Definitely a spear.” Oberyn didn’t hesitate. “I like to make fools of knights trying to fight with swords that have not half the reach of my long spear.” He saw Ser Arthur narrow his eyes and added, “Most knights, not all of them.”

“I would love to see that.” He saw Jon look at him expectantly.

‘Of course the boy would’, Oberyn thought. ‘Not today though I don’t feel like it.’ Aloud he said. “There’s no one here I would want to fight. You’re not there yet young man, and well, let’s just say I promised myself that I would never fight my good friend over there ever again.” He and Ser Arthur shared an amused look.

“Can you at least show me how you handle a spear? I mean twirl it without dropping it? I have never seen a man handle a spear before.”

Damn those puppy eyes!

Well perhaps I would, but I didn’t bring one with me.” He evaded.

“We have one here in our armoury.” Jon was already on his feet. I’ll get it for you.” And before Oberyn could react Jon had stormed off a highly entertained Ser Arthur on his trail.

Jon returned having difficulty carrying three spears of different lengths.

“Can you try with one of these, Prince Oberyn? These were the only ones available.” Hopeful dark eyes met his.

There was no reasonable objection he could think of so he stood up and chose the middle one. ‘No harm in showing him a few moves.’

Jon watched mesmerized as Oberyn moved in all directions the spear gliding along in perfect symmetry up and down, forwards, sideways.
Oberyn soaked up his adoration. He started to give short explanations in between moves. When to use a particular move, the possible countermoves of his opponent, how he would react and so on.

At one point Jon approached him. “Prince Oberyn, I did not understand that last bit. Maybe if I took the position of your opponent and you could repeat that move once more? It would make it easier for me. That was a difficult counterattack to visualize.”

‘Did I just get played by a small boy?’ Oberyn berated himself half an hour later.

Somehow the boy he had tricked Oberyn into volunteering to teach him the basics of fighting with a spear and defending against an opponent that wielded one. They had sparred a bit and Oberyn conceded he had enjoyed it immensely. Well it was easy teaching a boy who had been tutored by the Sword of the Morning. He had even promised the little Prince another sparring session, where the youth would be wielding a spear as Prince Oberyn defended.

Over the next few days Oberyn made an effort to discuss various topics with the boy. Unlike his daughters he had to draw him out. ‘If there was a negative quality to him, it was that he was too deferential, too considerate. He needed to grow some balls. His daughters could teach him.’ That thought had amused him.

Prince Oberyn had left the Driftmark full of energy and couldn’t wait to set all the agreed upon schemes in motion. He would teach those Northerners how the Dornish could work effectively behind the scenes. Besides, he hardly needed to take any risks.

He was fully committed and looked forward to seeing Elia’s stepson sit on that much coveted throne. Perhaps he could even get him to marry one of his daughters? The Prince didn’t strike him as someone who would look down on a person because of his birth and his daughters were beauties. ‘Yes, he would show both the Northerners and Prince Doran!’

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Ser Arthur was satisfied. His report would be brief. Lord Stark hadn’t overestimated Jon’s magnetism. The boy had removed Prince Oberyn’s last doubts.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we talk about dragons and direwolves. We also will see Varys and Ser Barristan again.
Maester Aemon sat in his study waiting for the arrival of Rhaegar’s only remaining son. He had wanted to speak to the child years ago. Instead he had been restricted to corresponding with Aegon in lengthy letters that took moons to reach the Prince since all correspondence between the two of them had to be carried by Benjen Stark or another messenger sent directly from the Prince’s entourage. There was no other way he was allowed to reach out to the boy. Well the Starks had kept him safe for almost twelve years now. So, at least they were doing something right.

At first this delay hadn’t bothered the Maester too much. But ever since a heavily disguised Ser Arthur Dayne had showed up at the Wall a few years ago carrying the three dragons eggs Lord Reed had instructed him to find, Maester Aemon had been urging the Starks to bring the Targaryen to him. The Maester was scared he would die of old age before he could convey the closely kept secrets of house Targaryen to the rightful heir to the throne. If there was any justice in this cruel world, one of the eggs might respond to the true King’s touch, if they were lucky perhaps two, or all three? He was tired of speculating.

He had been introduced to the Prince yesterday evening and had immediately felt a kinship with the child. He had reminded himself to call him by his alias and not show the boy any more attention than a formal greeting. But finally the wait was over. His grand-grand-nephew would be here anytime now. Maester Aemon was ready. He had been long prepared for this visit. He had checked once more this morning that all the books he had brought with him when he had arrived at the wall all those years ago were within reach. He had also verified he still knew all the secret places where the Targaryen artefacts were hidden in his room so he could ask his nephew to take them out if the conversation went as well as he had envisioned a thousand times by now.

And here it was, the eagerly awaited knock on the door! He heard the young boy enter together with the already familiar steps of Benjen Stark. Maester Aemon and Benjen Stark had indulged in several lengthy conversations over the years. They featured the topic of the wellbeing and education of Rhaegar’s son first and foremost, but also the situation at the wall and the Wildling threat were topics they talked about at length. Benjen Stark had often been his scribe when he dictated letters to his young nephew.

Maester Aemon would allow Stark to keep them company for a short while. Enough to give the
Prince the opportunity to grow comfortable with his old uncle and then he would demand a private audience with his kin. Some things were for Targaryen eyes and ears only, no matter how much gratitude he owed the Starks to keep this young man safe at the risk of their own lives.

“Come here my Prince”, he encouraged the boy. “Let me feel the contours of your face. My old eyes have not seen any light in a very long time. I would like to get to know the son of my grandnephew. And these are my only means to imagine what you look like.” He lifted his two hands up a bit.

“I am very honoured to finally make your acquaintance in person Maester Aemon and would like to take this opportunity to once more to thank you for all the kind advise you have given me in the past”, the boy replied politely. Maester Aemon felt the boy gently take one of his hands and bring it to his face.

“I’m am kneeling in front of you now. I am taller than this Maester.” Aemon heard the smile in Aegon’s voice.

“When in private, I give you leave to call me uncle.” He hadn’t expected he would warm up to the boy this quickly. “Great-great-uncle is such a mouthful. You can reserve the title Maester Aemon for when we are in company.” His hand felt the smile grow larger on his nephews face.

“I thank you, uncle”, the boy immediately complied.

The Maester moved his hand from Aegon’s face to his shoulder. “Greetings to you as well Stark”, Aemon looked in the direction where he had heard the man take a seat. “I trust the journey here was uneventful?”

“We got here safe and in good time.” Stark replied. “I have to convey to you the regards of my elder brother Eddard Stark and I would like to entreat you to keep in mind that Aegon has only known of his kinship with you for two weeks now. He prefers to be addressed as Jon.”

“I really don’t mind making an exception for the Maester”, the boy immediately countered. “Outside these chambers I am Jon, but in here we are two Targaryens who share blood.”

Aemon felt his old eyes grow moist. He still had his hands on Jon’s shoulder and patted it mildly, conveying his appreciation of that thoughtful comment. “Take a seat nephew. Pull that chair up if you will and sit close to me.”

He turned his head in the direction of Stark again. “Would you mind allowing us some time to talk in private? I will call for you once we’re done for today and will send the boy back with you. I promise I won’t let him leave this room unescorted.”

“It is ok uncle Benjen”, the boy replied softly confirming to Aemon that Stark had been hesitating. He heard Stark mumble something to the boy and leave the room.

The boy now addressed him. “You will have to be patient with me uncle. I am still coming to terms with all I have been told. I think I have accepted who my family is. I am not sure how I feel about all the political repercussions though. All I keep hearing is that I must claim the throne. That it is my birthright but also my duty.” He paused, Aemon could almost hear him thinking.

“I don’t mind you speaking your mind Aegon. Tell me what’s bothering you and I will see what I can do to help.” He hoped he had struck the right tone. He wanted the boy to open up to him.

“Well, I can’t help to think that if anyone can understand my lack of initial enthusiasm, it would be you uncle. You could have ruled Westeros. I hope you don’t mind such a blunt statement only minutes after meeting me.” The boy seemed to have found his resolve.
“Any ruler with a lick of sense would be hesitant,” his uncle reassured. “The ones who want the throne just for the sake of power and acclaim are not suited for such a responsibility. I have already learned a lot, from these first few minutes, my young charge. I had already gathered from our correspondence that you are intelligent, so you will have no problem to understand that my circumstances at the time I made this very important decision were completely different from the ones you face now. I already was a part of the Night’s Watch before my older brother died and I still had a worthy living successor. My choice did not leave the realm in chaos, at least not for the erstwhile foreseeable future.”

He paused and took his nephew’s hand to soften the words he knew would be hard to hear for the boy. “I am sorry to say this but you are the best hope for Westeros as far as I can tell. Your claim is superior to Viserys’ and the reports from Essos mention the mental health of the Prince is deteriorating notwithstanding the care he is being given. I am sorry to tell you but it will be very likely that one of the next reports from Essos will convey news of his death. The Prince is very ill.”

He could hear the boy exhale loudly and guessed he was trying to come to terms with this. He waited a bit listening closely to Jon’s breathing and continued when he sensed the boy was calmer.

“I just wanted to say that as long as I live I will be here to advise and help you. You will not have to do all of it alone Aegon. Besides, there are upsides to being a Targaryen. Wait until you know all the closely kept secrets of our house. One of them is a beautiful gift for you.”

He could hear the boy shift in his chair. He was probably sitting up. He had been able to catch the boy’s interest.

“The head of house Targaryen is entitled to wield a Valyrian sword. Nothing else would be good enough don’t you think?” He teased the boy.

“A Valyrian sword? Are you speaking true uncle? I have only heard of Dark Sister and Blackfyre? Aren’t they both lost?” Aemon could hear the excitement building in his nephew’s voice.

Go to the right side of the fire hearth, and search the floor for a tile that is a shade lighter than the others. You can also recognise it because of its chipped corner.”

He could hear the boy leave his chair even before he had finished speaking.

“Now lift it and you should see a package wrapped in cloth in the space below it. You may take it out and unwrap it.”

“It’s rather heavy uncle.”

“Just lift one corner and slide it to the right. Once it starts moving, the difficult part is over.” He heard Jon successfully move the stone.

“I see two packages uncle. I suppose I should take out the tall slim one?”

Aemon nodded and an exclamation could be heard almost immediately.

“If my history lessons were accurate this is Blackfyre, I recognise the big red ruby on the hilt. It also seems more robust than how I had pictured Dark Sister”, he heard the Prince say.

“It is Blackfyre”, he confirmed. “It was recovered and brought to me years ago. I had a premonition the right owner would come and claim it eventually. It is yours Aegon. I hear your training is going well and you will be a worthy owner. Best put it back for now. You can take it with you when you leave us in two weeks. But keep it covered. It would betray your origins in one instant, never mind your dark curls. I have heard Ser Arthur tell me there is much of Rhaegar in you.”

“Should I forget, remind me to tell you later about a folk tale regarding the Long Night and a Song of
Ice and Fire before you leave. It was something your father loved to talk about. I can give you a book to read about that as well.” Aemon rubbed his chin. “I’m sorry my young charge, I am getting off topic.”

“Don’t worry uncle”, Jon assured him, “I would like to read that book and I will make sure to remind you. Please ask me anything you want.”

“I want to hear you tell me some more about your life so far. Your letters over the years have only heightened my curiosity. Fill me in and leave nothing out. Would you be willing to start by explaining the bond you have with your dog, Max? That part of your heritage is new to the Targaryens.”

An hour later Jon summoned a steward to fetch his uncle Benjen. I seemed he had worn uncle Aemon out. The old man was softly snoring in his chair. Jon still had many questions left. He would make sure they had plenty of opportunities to talk some more the coming days.

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Several days later, somewhere on the road between castle Black and Eastwatch.

‘Fire and blood, Fire and blood’, the mantra repeated over and over in Jon’s head. They had started the journey towards Eastwatch where Davos Seaworth’s ship would be waiting for them. His mind was still reeling with everything his great-great-uncle Aemon had told Jon. He couldn’t wait to return to the Driftmark. There were three dragons eggs safely wrapped and tucked in an additional saddle bag he would not leave out of his sight. He would sleep with the bag under his bedfurs. They were too precious.

Jon had never felt such protectiveness before. The moment he had spotted the green egg, a feeling of belonging had come over him. When he had touched the egg it had felt warm under his touch and he could have sworn he had felt the egg reaching out to his mind. Maester Aemon had been elated when Jon had described what he experienced. He had urged Jon to try touching the other eggs as well. The beautiful white egg with silver sparkles was also warm to the touch and Jon felt a kinship with it, although nothing compared to the overwhelming feeling the green egg had provoked in him. The black egg however left him indifferent. It could as well have been just a shiny black stone.

His uncle Aemon had reassured him that he had already exceeded his expectations. His father, Rhaegar had desperately tried to connect with the eggs and failed. Jon stood a good chance to hatch two living dragons in the near future. The black egg was perhaps destined for Daenerys or for one of his future children. At least that was what Maester Aemon had implied.

Of course Jon would start the hatching process that his uncle had described minutely only when he was safely installed on the island once more. They would return to the Driftmark. If he was successful Jon and his guards would spend a lot of time on the most eastern point of the island. Nobody lived there at the moment since there was not much besides rocks and harsh winds. But Jon had once ventured there and played in caves that were big enough to provide shelter for growing dragons. His guards could easily travel between the small settlement and the caves. If they travelled on horseback they could make the journey back to the settlement in no time. Even on foot it would take no more than half a day.
It would be the ideal place to raise them and teach them to fly without attracting attention. Jon would make sure that all possible precautions were being taken to keep the existence of the eventual dragons a secret as long as possible. If he already felt this protective towards the eggs, Gods know what he would be willing to do to protect tiny vulnerable dragons. He suspected he would not hesitate to use lethal force against anyone who dared to threaten them.

Jon remembered with unease uncle Aemon’s advise regarding the Targaryen bloodline. He had seen the man hesitate before he advised him.

“Aegon, you should realise Targaryen blood is important to control dragons. If you are successful in hatching one or more dragons, you should consider marrying your aunt, Daenerys.”

Jon had started to protest but his great-great-uncle had put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Dragons live for several hundreds of years and an uncontrolled dragon could bring doom to the realm. If your children’s blood is too weak, they will not be able to control them. You would have to kill your dragons before you die.”

“My blood is only half Targaryen”, Jon had protested.

“You are lucky Aegon. Apparently the Stark blood contains magic as well and it appears it doesn’t lessen your Targaryen abilities. Against all odds, it seems to have enhanced them. But to further dilute your blood would not be advisable with dragons back into the world.”

“But she’s my aunt! I can not marry an aunt.” Jon really didn’t want to discuss this now.

Jon had been blindsided by his uncle’s demand. He was still coming to terms with the idea of possibly being responsible for owning, let alone controlling a dragon, and now this?

“Technically she is your aunt. But she is also just a girl of an age similar to yours. She is a virtual stranger to you. You have not grown up together. Targaryens have done other things.”

His Targaryen uncle seemed determined to convince his nephew.

“There are still a lot of ifs in your reasoning uncle. I will take it one step at a time. Let me first get these eggs safely to the Driftmark and see what happens then. Even if they hatch, it is not a given the baby dragons will live to reach adulthood. By the time they do, I will be older and more capable of making decisions about marriage.”

His uncle had stayed silent for a while but finally had warned him that while it was wise to take it slowly for now, one should always plan his next steps.

Jon tried to focus on the road ahead. Sandor Clegane was riding beside him. Luckily, the knight was not a talkative guy and left Jon to his own thoughts most of the time.

“Glad to be leaving the wall and the cold behind soon?” Jon didn’t want to ignore the man the entire journey. Besides he always liked his unique way of describing things. Clegane didn’t disappoint.

“Never knew it could get so fucking cold. A guy has to keep moving the entire time not to freeze his balls off. Certainly when there are no fucking opportunities to f ... “ He remembered just in time he was speaking to a twelve year old.

He tried again. “Never mind, I’m no whiner anyway. I hate fire, but now I’m almost grateful the barbaric thing exists.”

Jon smiled. He felt lighter already. They were nearing some woods. Going around would take them much longer as going through. He looked at his uncle Benjen for guidance.
His uncle didn’t disappoint. “There is a small path we can follow a bit further to the right. I’ll lead the way.”

Some time later, something itched in the back of Jon’s mind. He shook his head but the strange feeling only got stronger.

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Ser Oswell startled when Jon, who had been keeping in formation the entire time, suddenly led his horse to the right and without any warning left the road and headed deeper into the woods. A short panicked look at Ser Gerold and the two knights immediately went after their charge. They weren’t familiar with these woods and Benjen Stark had repeatedly warned everyone to stay alert for possible wild animals or roaming Wildings.

Swords drawn the two knights reached the clearing in the woods where the boy’s horse stood without its rider. They scanned the area and saw their Prince on his knees next to a dead wolf, if it even was a wolf? It certainly was the largest one they had ever seen.

Benjen Stark appeared next to them. “It is a direwolf, the sigil of house Stark”, he told them quietly. “I didn’t know some had ventured south of the Wall. I have only caught glimpses of them beyond the Wall when I accompanied the rangers of the Night’s Watch on a scouting mission. They are scared as hell of them”.

The three of them watched entranced as Jon took out five little whelps who were still trying to get milk from their dead mother.

“Jon”, Benjen Stark whispered though a warning could still be heard in his voice. “It is possible that the father is not far out. Leave them be and let’s get back to the road. We must get out of these woods before dark.”

Jon however didn’t get up. The small animals clearly welcomed the attention Jon bestowed on them. “We will take them with us.” He declared. “There are five of them. You have two nieces and two nephews and Lady Catelyn is about to give birth to a fifth. They belong to house Stark. It will be my gift to them.”

“Jon”, his uncle intervened “We are not on our way to Winterfell. You realise they are direwolves? Direwolves are wild animals.”

“They are the sigil of your house. Lord Reed gave me a vague premonition before we parted and I cannot help but feel this is what was always meant to happen. If they are raised from mere whelps alongside the Stark children, they will be tame enough. When we reach Eastwatch we will send them to Winterfell with the next trading convoy. When we board the ship, I would ask that you uncle, take them to my cousins in Winterfell yourself.” Jon’s voice trailed off.

He touched his head then looked over to the far side of the clearing. He gently put the whelps down beside his uncle and went over to investigate the far corner of the clearing where he had seen something white flash beneath the leaves. He signalled the two knights to keep their distance and carefully crept closer to that spot so he would not scare anything away.

He kneeled once more and gently removed a little white creature with red eyes from under the bushes. It was an albino direwolf whelp, clearly the runt of the litter. This little one was for him, Jon
was sure. His mind gently nudged the little wolf’s mind and it responded by licking Jon’s face enthusiastically.

Jon straightened and turned back around. “Please uncle, let’s pick them up and put them in a box on the wagon. I will personally care for them until we reach Eastwatch. Not deterred by his uncle’s disapproving scowl he urged, “Didn’t the Starks of old have direwolves riding beside them into battle?”

Benjen sighed and relented. “We’ll try to take them with us. But at the first sight of their father, we will release them. You wouldn’t want to be attacked by an angry full grown direwolf.”

It was an uneasy procession that walked back to the road. The knights kept a worried eye on the small animals carried by Jon and Benjen Stark.

“I’ll take care of this one.” Jon stated resolutely tucking the white wolf under his coat instead of in the wooden box. He would not be parted from this little white creature. This one was coming with him to the Driftmark.

Jon felt a small victory when everyone complied be it reluctantly. ‘There were advantages to being the ‘rightful heir’ to the Iron Throne. It was perhaps time to take somewhat advantage of this once in a while?’

He didn’t have to check. His mind felt the little wolf had gone to sleep safely tucked in against Jon’s chest. Jon had yet to hear a sound come from the small animal. ‘Ghost’, he thought, ‘his name shall be Ghost and Jon felt his mind relax as well. For the first time in weeks all was right in his world.

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Jon stood at the railing of the ship watching the Wall disappear. It stayed an impressive sight. He turned and went to the bridge where Davos seemed to be watching the same thing. Jon waited patiently for the man to finish contemplating the disappearing structure and turn his attention to him.

“I have long been wanting to tell you something Davos. Could we perhaps retreat to your cabin or do you know of a better place for a private conversation?”

Davos had expected to hear about Jon’s lineage. However he had been blown away by the talk of dragon eggs and the possibility of living dragons. He had refused Jon’s option of bowing out once things got too dangerous and had solemnly pledged his loyalty and support to whatever Jon would decide next.

The conversation with Sandor Clegane had gone a bit differently. Jon had reluctantly agreed to let Ser Gerold stand witness to it, bearing in mind his promise to uncle Ned. However he had ordered the knight to be as inconspicuous as possible. Jon had emphasised he should turn a deaf ear to any insults or curse words Clegane would possibly utter and not take them as personal insults to their Prince. The only valid reason to interfere would be if Clegane threatened to bodily harm him which Jon believed to be highly unlikely. Ser Gerold had stayed by the door not moving a muscle, but his hand was closed to his sword.

Sandor Clegane had listened to Jon without interrupting him. When he was sure Jon had nothing more to add he had thrown some questions at Jon.
“Does that mean I get a raise?” Was his first reaction.

Jon had been taken aback but had tried to keep his tone light.
“Do you want to get one? I don’t even know what you are paid now any way.” He waited nervously for the next salvo from Clegane.

“I’m not gonna kiss your boots or lick your arse, yer Grace. I’m not going to have to call you your Grace now am I?” he grumbled.

“Just stick with Jon for now.” Jon still watched him wearily.

“As long as you do not turn into one of those stuck up, no good for nothing Nobles who don’t look you in the face when they order you to kill some poor woman or child.” He uttered.

“Damn, I really liked you kid!”

“I’m still me. I’m still a kid. You have my permission to tell me when I’m acting ‘stuck up’. Jon started to relax a bit. He estimated Clegane’s initial reactions were promising.

“You bet ye, I will!” was the assertive response.

But then Clegane suddenly seemed to shrink. Jon noticed his eyes looking agitated at him. “I refused Lord Lannister’s offer because I wasn’t going to die for some fucking throne. He looked Jon straight in the eye and asked, “Am I going to die fighting for some fucking throne?”

“You might, if you decide to stick with me.” Jon replied honestly. “I don’t know yet how dangerous it will get if we decide to go through with it. I would try to use a diplomatic approach, perhaps bluff a bit, but I can not promise you it will not come to fighting.”

It was time for the big gamble.
“I will release you from your service if you give me your word of honour that you will keep my secret. I must be honest though, I would prefer it if you chose to stick with me. You’ve proven to be a loyal guard and a good friend so far.”

Jon hesitated but decided to be blunt, “I rely on you to cut through all the bullshit and tell me to my face what is going on, or what I could be doing wrong.”

Jon thought this could still go either way. He waited with bated breath to see how the man would react.

However, Clegane didn’t take long to make up his mind. He drew his sword and went to his knees. From the corner of his eye Jon saw Ser Gerold’s hand tighten around his sword’s pommel. He warned him to stand down with a stern look.

After the usual protocol had been dispensed with and Clegane had risen back to his feet, Jon added, “I can ask Ser Gerold to knight you, if you want. I will officially name you a member of my Kingsguard if you consent.”

I ain’t no fucking knight boy. And you’re no King yet. Think I will not protect you without some fancy title?”

Jon hadn’t expected anything different.
“No, I trust you with my life, Clegane. Already have, and will continue to do so. I thank you for your loyalty.”

Jon saw Ser Gerold relax. It had gone rather well, hadn’t it?
Weeks later somewhere in the Driftmark.

‘Fire and blood, it seemed so simple. Of course the blood should belong to the person that bonded with the egg so that meant it was only simple for the Targaryen destined to hatch it. It had taken Jon no more than a week to see a tiny green dragon crawl from the cracked egg shell.

Not sure the procedure would work he had minimised the risk and exposed only one egg to the fire that he had burning inside the cave at all times His two loyal knights took up guard duty and kept the fire going while Jon slept. They knew nothing of the small blood ritual however. Jon always performed it when the knights were outside guarding the entrance. They had no problem leaving Jon alone when he requested solitude for small periods of time. Their King was safe in there since there was only one entrance to the cave.

Uncle Aemon had been adamant. Only Targaryens who showed the potential for bonding with a dragon should be initiated into the process of this hatching ritual. It was dangerous to spread the knowledge amongst those who were ‘unworthy’ as his great-great-uncle called it.

Summerhall had burned down because an ‘unworthy’ Targaryen had tried to hatch the eggs without having a bond with them. Uncle Aemon had told him the tale. Frustrated, by their failure they had stoked the fires higher and when that hadn’t worked they had tried every accelerant the Maesters could come up with. The result had been the total destruction of Summerhall and the death of King Aegon V and his eldest son Duncan Targaryen.

Jon shook his head. ‘Fire and Blood’, it really had been simple. He took the shiny silver-white egg carefully out of the fire and reopened the cut he had made the first time he performed the ritual. Just a few drops each day, his great-great-uncle had instructed him. Jon followed these instructions to the letter. The small baby dragon watched the proceedings with keen eyes. It seemed the tiny green creature understood the importance of what his human was doing. Jon stroked its wings softly then put the egg back into the fire, careful not to burn himself.

He had noticed he was not as sensitive to fire as everyone else, but he could still get burned. If that happened however, he healed faster than the average burn victim. His Targaryen uncle had told him that Targaryens often had this ability to resist fire easier than non-Targaryens. He had told stories of his forefathers in Old Valeria who were rumoured to be totally fire resistant. He admitted that he didn’t know whether the stories were true or if it had been just exaggerated tales of the ability Jon displayed. Anyway it was a useful quality for a dragonrider.

Aemon also believed that the fire of the dragon, or dragons he bonded with should not be able to hurt him, if the old books on dragonlore were to be believed. Jon had been gifted one of these books and guarded it with his life. The book was mostly in High Valyrian and Maester Aemon had had to teach him how to decipher the most sensitive parts that were gibberish if you didn’t know the correct way to read them. It was a variant of the code he would use for his correspondence with his kin in Essos. Jon had already started his first letter and uncle Benjen had promised to provide him with a discreet messenger who would carry his letter to his aunt and uncle in person.

He had agreed to take precautions but would not be prevented from trying to establish contact between them. If they believed him to be who he was, he would stay in contact and double his efforts to create a safe place for them in Westeros so they could come home. He had his eye on Dragonstone. It would probably be some years before that could be arranged, but he would make it happen.
Jon’s musings were interrupted when a small ball of white fur leapt into his arms and startled the little green dragon. “Hello there Ghost.” The little direwolf blinked his puppy eyes at him. “Be kind to this little dragon. He is part of our pack”, he gently told Ghost. “We need a name for him though.” He looked at the little dragon, trying to enter his mind.
‘Rhaegal’, the name echoed in both their minds. “Rhaegal”, he tried out loud. The dragon nestled himself against Jon’s chest only inches away from where Ghost was situated. The puppy looked at the tiny dragon and whined quietly. The matter was settled. Rhaegar and Ghost carefully looked each other over before falling asleep.

Jon returned his attention to the egg that was lying in the middle of the fire that warmed the cave. ‘It won’t be long now and I will be responsible for three children’, he thought and somehow it felt the right term when he thought of the little wolf and dragon. They were family, he would be their parent.

Interlude 7: The value of an oath

Ser Barristan had been sitting in this little tavern for over an hour now. Normally he never ventured so far from the Keep. However he had to admit, the small establishment was nicer than he would have guessed from the outside. It was clean, not too crowded and the food had been tasty. The ale, well he would enjoy it more if he wouldn’t be so nervous.

The cryptic messages had started to arrive a moon ago, brief messages questioning his loyalty, his honour. As if his life wasn’t taxing enough, standing behind a door hearing a drunken King enjoying himself with Gods know how many whores at the same time. Barristan also had to stand beside him straight faced, seeing him neglect his duties, being rude and even dishonourable at times. He preferred guarding the royal children, although lately the crown prince had become a pain in the ass. Luckily Myrcella and Tommen were still agreeable children. And to think he had come so close to becoming Kingsguard to a noble King. How things could have been different if his friend Prince Rhaegar had succeeded in deposing his mad father.

Barristan sipped from the tepid ale. He hoped that he could put an end to this nonsense today. He hadn’t hesitated when the last message stated a meeting time and a place. Not even when he was ordered to come alone. He had been offended when he had read the last line where it stated no harm would come to him, that at least the messenger’s honour could be trusted. Well if he got killed today, so be it. He didn’t really care any longer.

He scanned the room once more. Had that far corner been occupied before? He squinted. It seemed an old man was sitting there now. ‘A farmer?’ He looked again. Now the man noticed him as well and nodded a greeting. Ser Barristan didn’t move. ‘Was that man someone who recognised a famous knight and greeted ‘Barristan the Bold’, or was he the elusive messenger?’

‘Well, I’ve been here long enough. See how he reacts when I pretend to leave.’ Barristan slowly stood, left some coins on the table and headed for the door, all the while watching the man from the corner of his eye.
The man called his bluff and removed the hood that had obscured his face before.

Ser Barristan faltered. He tried to hide his disbelief and changed direction. Without invitation he sat down on the opposite side of the table and faced his erstwhile Lord Commander.

Ser Gerold settled the hood back over his head obscuring his face once more. “No names”, he whispered. “I have a room upstairs and will retire now. If you like to hear what I have been up to all these years, you do as I say. Leave and try to reach the back entrance of this establishment without being seen. I will await you in the corridor and we can talk in private in my room.”

Barristan nodded and left without a word. ‘Twelve fucking years, they had let him grieve for twelve fucking years!’

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“You claim that there is a son of Rhaegar still living? You claim you are Kingsguard to the one True King and I to a usurper? You come here after twelve fucking years and you tell me a fairy tale?” Barristan whispered furiously. His eyes stared full with disbelief at Ser Gerold Hightower, former Lord Commander of the Kingsguard or perhaps not ‘former’.

“Lower your voice! Your whisper is almost louder than your speaking voice. And do not use names.”

Ser Barristan felt chastised. It was almost like the good old days when he was still under Ser Gerold’s command getting scolded for daydreaming during a briefing.

“If you know a safer place to meet, let’s hear it. Otherwise keep quiet and use code names.”

Barristan nodded. Ser Gerold could be as abrupt as he wanted. Barristan still wanted to hear what he had to say. He decided to wait him out. Ser Gerold hadn’t answered his earlier questions yet.

Ser Gerold relented. “I won’t tell you anything substantial about the Prince. Just know he is the trueborn son of our Prince, a Targaryen and will be the best ruler Westeros has ever seen. What I want to know is where your loyalties lie?”

Barristan shifted in his chair and looked uneasy. “I’m bound by my vow to the stag. This is a wretched situation. You know I would give my life for that family you protect. But how can I do it without dishonouring myself?”

Barristan was proud he had avoided speaking names.

Ser Gerold snapped back but kept his voice quiet, “I do not consider myself dishonoured. We did what we had to do to keep our King safe.”

“You have not dishonoured yourself since you did not swear to the stag.” Barristan damned his hastily taken vow for the millionth time.

“Did you call him by his name or did you swear to the rightful King when you pledged yourself?” Ser Gerold retorted.

“Word games, everyone knows what was implied.” Barristan felt weary now.
Ser Gerold mulled it over. “If you really want to serve my family again, you could go to the stag and tell him you are an old and tired man who wishes to live out his old days peacefully somewhere else, technically not a lie old friend.” He offered.

“And then you disappear.”

Barristan frowned and stayed silent.

“But before we take such drastic steps, do you think the Spider could be trusted to spy for us? If not, you would be more useful here in Kingslanding serving my family here as an informant.” Barristan saw Ser Gerold eyes studying him, a hopeful look in them.

Barristan sighed. “I think there is a chance, but with Varys you never know for sure. I could set up a meeting? We’ve had some conversations and I know he is sympathetic to my plight. He doesn’t like how the Kingdoms are ruled. If he was presented with a good alternative … “ Barristan stopped, unsure.

He looked at Ser Gerold.

“But why would you want to take such a risk? I am glad you talked to me, although your twelve years late for the Gods’ sake. I know and I hope you know that I can be trusted, but Varys? It is a risk.”

“What if I told you that it wasn’t?” was the enigmatic reply of is former Lord Commander.

“Let’s sleep on it and meet again shall we say in two days time. This time you can name the place. Just send word here. And do not sign the message.”

Barristan knew he was dismissed. He would not learn anything more today.

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Two days later in a small storage room of a blacksmith on the street of steel in Kingslanding.

“Original meeting place”, Ser Gerold greeted Ser Barristan.

“It was not my suggestion.” Ser Barristan muttered and Ser Gerold saw a man dressed in a large robe bend himself to enter the small door.

Loud hammering noises, normal for the workshop of a blacksmith could be heard, the sound lessening only by a bit when the Master of Whisperers closed the door. He lifted his hood and revealed his bald head.

“Glad to see you are still alive and well, Ser Gerold. Ser Barristan told me the best news I have had heard in years.” Varys’ voice was as smooth as ever.

“I hope I can return the sentiment.” Ser Gerold looked pointedly around the little room.

“I thought this an excellent meeting place. Nobody will suspect. Tobho Mott is part of my loyal network and the noise will make it impossible to hear anything if you are not inside this room. I challenge you to find a spy in here.”

The room was tiny. There was no place to hide anything larger than a cat. Ser Barristan saw Varys smirk.

“Now what can I do for you? Ser Barristan wouldn’t say much. Only, and I quote ‘I had to come for
the good of the realm’ end quote. Now how do you know that such a thing is enough of a motivation for me?” The Spider looked expectantly at Ser Gerold.

“Would you believe me if I told you a greenseer told me?” came the cryptic reply of Ser Gerold.

“Actually, that’s almost the only thing I would believe. I do not think I have ever told anyone.” Ser Barristan could see that Varys was intrigued.

“What if I told you that I had a rightful heir to the throne, a worthy one, one of excellent character, and an elaborate plan to put him on the throne with minimal bloodshed when the time is right?” Barristan noticed the confidence in Ser Gerold’s eyes.

“I would like to hear more, but can not help but wonder why you need me then. If you have that so-called perfect King and perfect plan, why would you need my humble services?” Varys was intrigued. Barristan wanted to hear the answer to that as well.

“Perhaps you have a role in this perfect plan of ours and we want to trust you?” Ser Gerold was quick to retort.

“Does this plan of yours involve the Targaryens across the narrow sea?” Varys shot back?

“Not necessarily, but even if, then only one of them.” Ser Gerold really seemed to enjoy baiting him.

“Good answer, are you talking about a queen instead of a king?”

“No.” Ser Gerold kept his answer brief.

“Can you give me an inkling of what my role would be?” Varys was stalling. Barristan saw Varys was close to figuring it out, his eyes twinkled with excitement.

“Sabotage Littlefinger, ferret out weaknesses of the Lannisters, we’re working on a way to remove Renly from the small council without hurting him. We would need you for that as well. Also once everything starts, we will require you to make sure the royal children disappear somewhere safe so if something went awry and there is a moment of chaos, we can still go ahead and be sure they will be safe. We really do not want history to repeat itself. More details will follow when the time is right.” Barristan saw Ser Gerold hesitating as if to say more but kept silent.

“A real humanitarian, your King?” Varys asked.

“Something like that”, Ser Gerold confirmed.

“When will the time be right?”

“Our king is still too young”, Ser Gerold was playing with him.

“Is he of Targaryen blood?” Varys asked.

“Yes”, Ser Gerold didn’t hesitate.

“Trueborn?”

“Yes.” Ser Gerold was giving away too many clues, Ser Barristan thought. He should stop baiting Varys and tell it like a normal person. Varys was almost there anyway.

Varys looked at Ser Gerold totally relaxed now.
“You know I have figured it out, don’t you? You’re alive, Ser Arthur, Ser Oswell too I suppose. It’s not Daenerys. Viserys is dead and sired no children. The North is involved. It can only be a son of Rhaegar but not by Elia. Benjen Stark is involved…”

“It’s a Dragonwolf! Ned brought Lyanna’s body home. She was young and healthy, so she died in childbirth?” Varys halted. “The trueborn thing however? Rhaegar was still married to Elia, was he not?”

Barristan saw him looking at Ser Gerold excitement clear on his at other times stoic face.

“Only the grand Septon could … Varys’ voice trailed off.

“The marriage with Elia was annulled. They were married. We bore witness. He is trueborn.” Ser Gerold was adamant.

Ser Barristan had been a silent witness to the word duel but now he couldn’t help but interject, he was hurt. “Why wasn’t I informed of the marriage? I fought with him on the Trident, he never said a word! And why did you keep this from me for twelve fucking years?”

This was the first time since entering the room that Ser Gerold turned away from Varys and focussed his attention on Ser Barristan.

“I don’t know why Rhaegar didn’t tell you.” The knight seemed to look for the right words. “Lyanna was pregnant. I know he had planned to parley with the Starks before the battle began. Clear up the misunderstandings. Prevent the battle. But either Stark wasn’t there or something else went wrong. I don’t know. I wasn’t there. He had ordered us to stay in Dorne. If their unborn child was a son and Rhaegar fell during battle, the three of us had sworn to him we would protect the new King. That was our orders. That was the reason we weren’t on the Trident that fateful day. But we have been true to our word and have been protecting our King ever since.”

Varys looked at Ser Barristan. “Nobody knew. If ever there was a secret that needed keeping, this was it. They did a splendid job. King Robert would have let them smash his little head to the wall. I see why they didn’t tell you.”

Varys turned his attention to Ser Gerold again. “Did the greenseer help you from the beginning? Do you realise how many head aches you have cost me over the years?”

Ser Gerold only answered. “He did, he even did it without my knowledge for many years.”

“And”, Varys enquired, “what would it take to persuade you to tell me what happened to Tywin Lannister?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Edric Dayne, Gendry Waters and Sam Tarley make an appearance and Jon meets new people during a trip to and from Essos.

It will be a huge chapter with two interludes at the end. That way the number of interludes matches the number of chapters. I like it better that way.
Rite of passage

Chapter Summary

Jon makes new friends and takes them along on a sea voyage
Jon gets mail.
Oberyn helps the conspiracy

Chapter Notes

Please remember the interludes can be past, present or future glimpses of the story.
I have added a short bonus interlude. That way the number of interludes will be equal to the number of chapters.

Fair warning: I have nothing against same sex relationships. However, in GRRM’s world they are still outlawed and I have opted to stay true to canon in regard to this topic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Driftmark.

“You have to let me go! Jon argued heatedly. Ghost who lay quietly at Jon’s feet perked up his ears and looked at Jon, his red eyes silently asking if he should lend his support. Jon just petted him reassuringly and his wolf settled back down.

“How can I become a man? Do you really want to put an inexperienced green boy in charge of the Seven Kingdoms? I have never been engaged in a real battle, only played at being a knight.” He was tired of having to defend himself again. Hadn’t this all been agreed upon moons ago?
“How will I know the dragons will follow me when I venture further than a few miles from this island? How will I know I can communicate with them when I am on a boat and they are inland? And more importantly, how will I know that they will listen to my orders and not overreact? I need to be sure they will stand down at my command even if it appears I am being threatened.”

His uncle Benjen, his three Kingsguards, Davos Seaworth and Sandor Clegane were present for this discussion. Uncle Ned had sent his brother to air his grievances. His Targaryen uncle had just urged him to take care in his last letter and Howland Reed had avoided the topic. He had however given them a most welcome piece of news on another matter.

“Jon, your uncle Ned urges you to annul this trip. His most fervent reasons being that you’re barely sixteen and that you are too valuable. Without you there is no cause.”

“Sixteen is old enough uncle. How old was Ser Arthur when he joined the Kingsguard? How old were you when you faced your first enemy? How old do most men get married? I can go on uncle. I’ll never get a chance to become mature enough if you keep me in a gilded cage and protect me like I am still an ignorant child. I have to learn to do things by myself, think for myself. I need to know how to react to unexpected situations, even if it means making a few mistakes along the way. Do you
really think the Lords are going to respect a green boy?”

Jon wasn’t going to back down on this. They were set to leave in a week for the first leg of their trip. He looked at his audience almost pleading now.

“I need to step up my training, you can only learn so much from make believe scenarios, I need real life situations. I will lack confidence going to war for the Seven Kingdoms if it is my very first conflict. Surely you must understand that? You all have lived through several battles. You must still remember how you felt your first time? It is your duty to prepare me as best at you can and as far as I can see, you are not finishing the job well.”

“Besides, it will be more difficult for me, I will need to concentrate on battle and keep the dragons in check simultaneously.” He felt bad for guilt tripping them like that but he had been making plans for several moons and now, days before they were about to cast off they were hesitating to let him go.

“Not if you rode one of them during the battle.” uncle Benjen tried to dismantle his last argument.

“There not large enough yet.” Jon retorted.

“I will be the best protected Prince in the Seven Kingdoms.” Jon resumed his plea. “I’ve got three famous knights and Sandor Clegane. Gendry, Edric and I can defend ourselves. Davos will handpick the ship’s crew amongst the seamen we have been training for battle. Most of the sailors can defend themselves adequately and some even showed real talent with a sword or spear. Just the Maester, the cook, and a few stewards will be untrained. And do not forget, if Gods forbid we should encounter a superior force, I will have my dragons at the ready to fly in.”

Jon sensed he was making ground. Ser Gerold especially didn’t look grim just thoughtful.

“I can not see anything happening on the first stage of our journey since we will sail alongside the trade convoy to and from Essos. We will take the shipping lane every trade ship takes. The second part of our journey you are free to arrange any protective measure you see fit. Besides we will be sailing North with three ships so we can convey the latest shipment of glass to the Northern Lords, three large ships that will be full of armed men. I grant you that on a small part of the journey there could be the potential of an Ironborn attack but we will scout their movements very carefully and take no risks. You can check the detailed itinerary and we all will stay in contact as much as possible.” He looked at his uncle Benjen when finishing his last sentence.

Ser Gerold intervened. “The trip to Essos can go ahead as planned. On the return trip we can evaluate the feasibility of your proposed journey to the Stony Shore. Ser Oswell will not accompany us to Essos so he will have time to arrange abundant protection.”

“I’ll have Ghost with me for the journey across the Crownlands and Riverlands. He can scout and warn us long before trouble reaches us. When we board the ships at Seagard we plan to stay close to the coastlines anyway. The dragons can follow and can provide extra protection. I will be able to test how long they can stay in the air and how high and how far they can fly. If they get tired, land won’t be far off for them to find a secluded spot to rest up. All this exercise will probably benefit them as well. Afterwards they will be the stronger because of it.” Jon argued his case most fervently.

“I still think we are taking unnecessary risks. What if someone gets wind of who you are? We have been working so hard, and we’re so close now. If the situation continues to evolve, we could be making our play in less than a year.”

His uncle Benjen looked apologetically at Jon. He usually took his side in internal conflicts but this time he was here in the capacity of the worried parent and stand in for the Warden of the North. He wouldn’t be able to join Jon on this voyage and feared for his safety.

“All the more reason for a trial run now. It will be my last chance before I have to come out into the
open and fight for my claim. It is also my last chance for some normalcy. Sailing is a rite of passage for the males of house Velaryon. No one will find it strange that Jon Celtigar will make a sea journey before his seventeenth nameday.”

“What about the Ironborn?” Uncle Benjen objected.

Jon focused on his uncle to the exclusion of all else and answered him heatedly. “Can’t wait to meet them personally. I’ve heard nothing but reports of your people having to fend them off, time and again. I have begged you repeatedly to let me help the North by hindering their raids with nightly attacks. The dragons could be in and out in a flash, leaving their ships burning. The Ironborn will hardly have a chance to recognise what is attacking them and would probably not believe their eyes. Those who would dare to voice their suspicion would be laughed at. Besides, I would love the first victim of my sword to be a Kraken!”

“Lord Varys has warned you that he has heard some vague rumours about possible dragons but quelled them, luckily before Littlefinger got wind of them. You have Lord Reed to thank for this as well. But do not get too brazen or your luck will run out.” Benjen Stark cautioned

Jon made an effort to control his voice and countered. “Even if a rumour surfaced, nobody will know they are ours. And the princess Daenerys is living in a veritable fortress for now. Hells, if necessary we could even start the rumour that the Golden Company might have dragons. They wouldn’t mind. It would only enhance their reputation for the time being.”

“Uncle, let’s stop arguing about this. Let’s try to spend the time that you are here to go over our strategies once more. That will be more productive if your goal is to keep me safe.” His eyes implored his favourite uncle to relent.

Jon turned to the others and changed the topic for now. “We still have a lot to discuss. If Lord Reed is right, Jon Arryn will succumb to his illness and the King will ride north to ask uncle Ned to become be his Hand. We still need to synchronise our actions. Timing will be crucial to avoid casualties. Let’s go over it once more and discuss everyone’s part.”

“We are scheming on several fronts. Let us discus the steps to free up Dragonstone first. A you know, we plan to discredit the royal children, remove Renly from the line of succession, see to it that Stannis gets Storm’s end, get Lord Velaryon to be the one to appoint a castellan on Dragonstone and then the Princess Daenerys gets to come home.”

“Crucial to this scheme is that we have sufficient influence in Kingslanding. I know it will be a difficult task for uncle Ned, but when the King asks him to be his Hand, he will have no good reason not to accept. He can share his reluctance with the King, let him stew for a few days and then agree to his offer only if the King will allow him to wait a bit longer to formalise the proposed betrothal of Sansa and Joffrey. He can say he’ll only say yes to one request for now and consider the other when Sansa and Joffrey are both older.”

“He will not like the idea of being the Hand of a King that he’ll have to overthrow.” His uncle muttered. “I know it must be done, but I didn’t realise my brother would be in such a prominent position when it all starts. Ned will struggle with it, question his honour. Brood even more than you.” Uncle Benjen sighed.

“It can’t be helped uncle. If rumours start about the royal children, uncle Ned’s role will be vital to keep the King calm and slowly convince him that these are no rumours. He will be the one to keep King Robert’s wrath in check in order to prevent him from harming innocent children once again.”
“Hopefully we will have solid proof by then. Eddard Stark must influence King Robert to return Storm’s End to Stannis Baratheon. If our timing is right the others will have succeeded in discrediting Renly.”

“My uncle needs to persuade King Robert to issue an official decree in which Stannis is officially proclaimed as first in line for the throne until such a time that the King has sired trueborn children and he has to reinstate him as Lord of Storm’s End immediately.” Jon reiterated the plan they had come up with.

Lord Reed really had come through for the conspiracy. He had told them that he was certain that the royal children were not King Robert’s children. The Lannisters were scheming to put a pure blood Lannister bastard on the throne. Lord Reed did not know which Lannister had sired the children exactly. However, he was certain they were not the rightful heirs to the throne.

“Varys will help him. He will spread rumours, and present the idea to the small council. But uncle Ned will have to lend it weight to convince King Robert.” Jon knew he would be asking a lot of Lord Stark but the situation was an unexpected windfall.

“When Lord Velaryon is officially named as castellan of Dragonstone we’ll leave the Driftmark and install ourselves on Dragonstone. Not only will it be easier to live with the dragons there, it will be easier to defend. We’ll move a large part of our fleet there as well.”

“And just as Aegon the conqueror, Dragonstone will be the place where everything is put into motion. Rather poetic isn’t it?” His uncle Benjen could always be counted on to lighten the mood.

“Uncle Benjen” Jon urged him once more, “I count on you to ease uncle Ned’s mind. If everything goes as planned, his actions will save the lives of the royal family, the children included. This fact alone should soothe his mind. Besides King Robert is a child killer and would murder me without thinking twice. There will be no real dishonour involved on uncle Ned’s part.

You will need to leave soon, uncle Benjen. Lord Reed couldn’t see precisely when it would happen, but we must be prepared. Varys has affirmed that Lord Arryn’s health is declining. I want you to reach Lord Arryn before he dies. It is important that you get back to Winterfell before the King does.”

“I know the royal family’s behaviour patterns. If Arryn dies the King won’t come north straight away. I give him at least two moons before he is finally ready to set out with his entire entourage. If the Queen insists on travelling in the large royal wheelhouse, they will practically be crawling to Winterfell, perhaps even schedule other visits along the way. It will take several additional moons before he arrives at Winterfell. There is still plenty of time.” Ser Gerold calmly informed everyone.”

“That’s good to hear, Ser Gerold”, Jon replied. Let’s discuss the other matters.

“Well”, Ser Gerold spoke up “We still need to put in place the messenger system Jon has proposed. Jon felt Ghost nudge his mind. He looked at him and realised that Ghost was restless and wanted to go outside for a run. He silently consented and Ghost was off in a flash.

“I’m sorry, where were we?” Jon asked trying to refocus on the meeting after Ghost had disappeared from sight.

“Your ideas of enhancing our messenger system.” Ser Gerold helped his Prince back on topic.

Jon explained. “We need to increase the frequency of our communications with every party
involved. I want to establish a chain of messengers. We are spread throughout the realm and have to be able to react quickly if the political situation changes in some part of the realm. We will double the ravens and also should appoint several extra messengers to travel regularly between all our major bases of operations. No effort should be spared, this is too important. Once things start happening, our communication system should be flawless. If the situation is dire, I can even guide a raven personally. So if ever a raven should land on your shoulder, don’t hurt it. You can safely use it to convey a message back to me, perhaps even if I am at sea at the time. We can try it sometime. Don’t take to long to send it on its way though. It requires some concentration on my end to pull that off.

“Now, about that last report from the Reach, my uncle has received a scroll from lady Olenna, …”

The meeting went on for some time but Jon had gained the upper hand. They would depart in a sennight.

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Dinner that night was a boisterous affair. Jon was in a good mood. “Is everyone acquainted already?” Jon had just joined the table where Edric, Gendry and Sam seemed to be bonding most likely due to their almost equal amount of namedays.

“Well”, Sam said hesitantly, “We have introduced ourselves, I know everyone’s names but that’s about all.”

“Then let me remedy that at once, my friend.” Jon really was carefree this evening. “Everyone, meet Sam. He will probably have told you that he is the son of Randyll Tarly, a prominent Lord of the Reach. But that’s just boring stuff. The interesting tale is how I met Sam.”


Jon complied with a smile. “Well for reasons entirely his own, Sam was travelling to the Wall to join the Night’s Watch. His ship was attacked and robbed by Ironborn not far from our coast. Sam was one of the few who escaped with their lives. Together with the other survivors, he was able to lower a small rowing boat into the water and reach the Driftmark. I happened to be near the port when they moored and convinced Sam to stay with us for the time being.”

Jon omitted the parts of the story Sam had told him in confidence. His father had disinherited him because he was overweight and craven compared to his athletic younger brother. His father was a famous military man and wanted his heir to follow in his footsteps. Sam would not do at all. He gave the boy a choice. Join the Night’s Watch were you relinquish all claims to land and titles or get killed during a hunting accident his father would orchestrate. Sam had been disheartened and had taken his only way out.

Sam had finished his tale by admitting to Jon that he was indeed craven. He had told him what had really happened during the attack on their ship. Most of the crew had been taken prisoner or were killed. Sam had hidden himself while the battle raged. After the Ironborn had left, the few survivors had escaped the fast sinking ship and had rowed ashore.

Jon had been near the coastline with his dragons when the small boat arrived. He had immediately taken Sam under his wing and had reassured him that he had taken the best course of action. If there
was no way to win the battle, you had to find a way to survive. It had been the smart thing to do, Jon had reassured him. Sam and Jon had become fast friends.

Jon completed his tale. “Sam will first travel with us to Pentos. Then we’ll cross the Riverlands and board a ship at Seagard to sail north. But if I have it my way, Sam will not leave us for the Wall.”

“I have to Jon.” Sam stated quietly

“We’ll see about that Sam. Don’t worry. You still have several moons before you need to make your final decision. We’re not in the North yet. If by then you are still determined to dedicate your life to the Watch, we will not stand in your way. Doesn’t mean I will not stop trying to change your mind, consider this your official warning.” Jon smiled at Sam but then included all his friends in his next words.

“At the very least, we can make it an interesting journey. Let’s drink to that. To an adventurous journey!”

Everyone lifted their pints. “Hear hear!”

The adults in the room looked over to the table where the youngsters were boisterously entertaining themselves. “Let them enjoy this time. Nobody knows what the future will bring.” Benjen Stark stated. The others agreed.

“Well Jon”, Sam felt at ease in Jon’s company, “Now you’ve told my story. That was the one I happened to know already by the way. I was rather expecting you to give me some interesting details about our new friends here.”

“My apologies My Lord”, Jon joked. “Let’s continue the introductions shall we,” He bowed to Sam.

“To your left My Lord, you see Edric of House Dayne, heir to Starfall in Dorne and very popular with the ladies because of his pale blond hair and dark blue eyes. He is also the nephew of one of my most esteemed protectors and advisers, Ser Arthur.”

Edric played along and stood up making a formal bow to Sam. “Pleased to meet you Lord Tarly.”

Then he sat down again.

“And to your right my dear Lord”, Jon was clearly enjoying himself. “Please meet Gendry Waters, a tall and very strong young man, with blue eyes and thick black hair. He apprenticed with Tobho Mott, a famous blacksmith in Kingslanding but for some mischievous reason of his own decided to leave the stinking city and make a living in a more peaceful place. Well we certainly can use a good blacksmith so we’ve persuaded him to stay with us at our modest island. We’ve started to give him some formal fighting training, teaching him to use a sword but he stubbornly prefers a hammer and if you let him, he can teach you some really cool moves with it.”

This was also the leaner version of what had really happened.

Gendry had arrived with Davos Seaworth when he returned from his last visit to Kingslanding. Davos had met up with Varys for an update. The meeting was held once more in the little backroom of Tobho Mott’s blacksmith shop. Varys had told them how the Lannisters had suddenly started an all out search for King Robert’s bastards and were slaughtering them all. He had even heard of a baby being torn from a woman’s breast and being stabbed to death before the mother’s eyes.

Varys had begged Davos Seaworth to take the young apprentice with him. The boy had not been
discovered yet. He probably was the eldest bastard of King Robert who was still alive. His mother had died a few years ago. Tobho Mott who had sometimes seen the young boy wandering past his shop, had realised the potential his young body was already revealing, namely the possibility of growing very large and strong. He had taken the boy in and had started to teach him his trade. The blacksmith had been disappointed to see the boy leave with Seaworth. Gendry had been a promising apprentice.

As soon as Jon had finished his tale, Gendry smirked and lifted his cup, a deliberate suggestion to the others. The four boys raised their glasses and drank to each other’s health once more.

Jon felt content. If only Robb were here, things would have been perfect. He promised himself to start another long letter to his cousin in the North.

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“I really enjoy being out on the open water.” Jon looked out over the railing of the ship. They had finally started their journey. “Why have we not done this before?”

“Do I really have to answer this question?” Davos looked pointedly in the direction where Ser Arthur and Ser Gerold were talking quietly.

“Pentos is not really that far from the Driftmark, is it?” Jon enquired. “How long will it take to sail there?”

“A sennight if the winds are fair. A bit more if they are not.” Davos Seaworth replied simply.

The conversation halted. Jon focused his attention on Ser Arthur. The knight had taken out Dawn, the famous sword of house Dayne and was cleaning it reverently. It was not often that Ser Arthur brought Dawn out in the open. But the men on the ship were all chosen for their loyalty and discretion. Besides it would not be long now before they would all out themselves.

Jon’s mind drifted to his own beautiful sword, Blackfyre. This was the first time he had brought it along. Ser Arthur had approved stating he should get used to handling the sword. It would not do to hide it away only to find out that when it really mattered, Jon wouldn’t be familiar enough with it to wield it properly.

They had agreed to dedicate part of their training sessions to sparring with their ancestral swords. Today had been the first time. Jon made a seamless transition from his dulled metal training sword to Blackfyre. Although Blackfyre was significantly lighter, wielding the sword just felt natural to Jon. The dulled metal training sword he had been using since graduating from the wooden one, years ago, had been made to resemble his Valyrian sword in both size and shape. If anything, wielding Blackfyre seemed easier.

For once Ser Arthur did not criticize much during that part of their session. Both men paid close attention and were careful not to wound each other. Jon figured they both realised how easily these swords could cut through their shields and armour.

When they finished Ser Arthur patted Jon’s shoulder. “You’ve improved significantly Jon, but do not get overconfident, you are not there yet.”

That was rare praise coming from Ser Arthur. Jon wondered now whether the fact that Ser Arthur had stayed quiet during their session had been more significant than he had thought at first. He
already looked forward to the next time they could fight with their true swords.

He walked past the small crowd that had assembled on deck to watch Jon face the famous knight. Jon just acknowledged Davos with an absent nod, went back this cabin to clean his precious sword and put it away safely. Seated on his bunk bed he took out the bundle of letters from his aunt once more and tried to imagine his how their first meeting would go.

***

A few nights later the four boys were playing cards in Jon’s cabin. It was a tight fit but that didn’t stop them from having fun. If anything it was easier to bump into each other and playfully sabotage the game by peeking at the other’s cards. The game wasn’t important. It was just an excuse to spend time together.

For a while now they had been talking about past experiences, the cards lying forgotten on the small crate between them. Gendry boasted about all his interactions with girls and Edric tried to match him. Sam and Jon didn’t participate but didn’t miss a word. Then Jon changed the subject to fighting techniques and a bit later he somehow found himself talking about the time Prince Oberyn, the famous Red Viper had visited the Driftmark when Jon had celebrated only twelve namedays. He boasted how he had coaxed a reluctant Prince into teaching him how to wield a spear.

Gendry grew quiet and asked to be excused. He was tired and would like go to bed. Edric decided to call it a night as well and followed him out. Sam who suspected the two of them would revisit their previous topic about girls and sex stayed with Jon a bit longer.

Jon immediately capitalised on this opportunity. “Sam I need you to promise me something.”

Sam saw the serious look on Jon’s face and hardened himself, he would be ready to refuse his friend. “If this is about me joining the Night’s Watch again?” He already regretted not having followed his friends to their joint cabin.

“It is. Sam I need you to promise me you will not decide anything before you have had the opportunity to talk with my uncle Benjen about this. He can tell you objectively what life at the Wall is like. If you do not believe my descriptions, believe him. I vow I will not influence him beforehand. He will be a reliable source of knowledge. Use it. Question him thoroughly, think on it some more and only then make a well informed decision.”

Sam couldn’t deny Jon this earnest request. “I promise.” He answered got up and retired as well.

Back in the cabin the three boys shared, Gendry had a grimace on his face when he addressed Edric. “This gets better and better. Lords, Princes and Jon just mentions them as if it is the most normal thing in the world. He even sparred with this Prince Oberyn of Dorne! Before I met you all, I don’t think I had ever met a single noble person, let alone a Prince. Now I live amongst noble knights and lords. Did you know I have even heard Jon being called ‘my Prince’ at more than one opportunity? Is there something everyone knows but me?”

Edric looked pensive. “You know I have been thinking the exact same thing. First I thought Jon was just an orphan of an important Lord who needed a lot of protection for some reason or other. Perhaps his father had a lot of enemies, or was very rich. But lately I have observed other things.”
Sam entered the cabin before Edric could say more. Sam had heard the last few words and noticed them halt and stare at each other as two small boys who had been caught doing something naughty. “What are you two whispering about? Are you still speculating about Jon and girls?”

“It is about Jon. However it has nothing to with his apparent lack of courage when it concerns dealing with the other sex, are sex as a deed.” He saw Sam blush at his words.

“Hey do you know something about that? Is that why Jon was so quiet? Does he have a girlfriend somewhere?” Gendry tried to distract Sam.

“No”, Sam said. “Besides, I told you before to let Jon be.”

“Let’s get back on topic. If it wasn’t about girls this time, then what was it that you were talking about in those hushed tones? From where I stood it looked like you were up to no good.”

“Why do you always think the worst of us? Just because we like to pull a prank once in a while …” Edric complained.

“Never mind that, you are stalling. Now I am really curious to know why you seemed to be conspiring.” Sam was getting worried. Jon was his friend and he would do what he could to keep these rascals line.

“Sam”, Gendry started. “Have you ever heard Ser Gerold, Ser Oswell or Ser Arthur refer to Jon as ‘my Prince’? I think I even overheard Ser Davos say it once?”

Sam, surprised by the serious turn the conversation had taken pondered this for a moment. “What if they do? Perhaps it is just an endearment, like Davos calls me ‘son’ sometimes?”

“I do not believe you can dismiss it so readily. I for one think there is more to it.” Edric whispered.

“Have you seen that sword he used this morning? Ser Arthur was sparring with Dawn and I could have sworn that the one Jon used was a made of real Valyrian steel as well. I had not seen anyone use that particular sword before. You know I have worked in Tobho Mott’s workshop and seen several beautiful swords but the sword Jon held was just exquisite. It had this beautiful red ruby and the hilt was a work of art.”

“Guys”, Sam tried to stop them.

“And haven’t you ever wondered about his direwolf? It is said they normally only live north of the Wall and are extremely wild and dangerous. According to legend, only house Stark can control them. Jon as we can all testify has absolute command of Ghost.” Edric said bolstered by Gendry’s cooperation.

“Perhaps he has Stark blood? It certainly would explain him referring to Benjen Stark as ‘uncle Benjen’.” Sam said a bit uneasy. “You know, I am not comfortable talking about Jon like this behind his back. Say that you are right and there is more to him than we know, have you ever thought there could be a very good reason as to why we were not told?”

“I do not understand”, Gendry interjected.

“Perhaps we’re not supposed to understand. If Jon wants us to know, he will tell us. That is, if there is anything to tell and if he even knows himself what there is to know, you know? I am not making sense, am I?” Sam concluded hesitantly.

“No.” Gendry had a hard time making sense of any of it.
“I get the gist of it.” Edric replied. “You want us to leave Jon in peace. According to you we should wait until he is ready to tell us what is going on, if we are right in the first place and there really is something going on. You also mentioned Jon might not know anything himself either.”

“Why didn’t you explain it like that to begin with?” Gendry complained.

“I have a better idea”, Edric looked at Sam. “Would it be alright to ask Davos Seaworth?”

“Ask him what?” Gendry looked at Edric as if he had two heads.

“Why they sometimes call Jon ‘My Prince’ Gendry.” Edric was getting frustrated.

“I don’t know”, Sam answered. “That could also be considered as going behind Jon’s back.

“We do not mean him any harm”, Edric insisted. “We are just curious.”


“He is more loyal to Jon as to me, which is exactly my point anyway. Why would my uncle be so loyal to Jon, the son of an average Lord? Ser Arthur is a former Kingsguard, the most famous knight in the entire realm used to guarding Kings and their royal offspring. Why would he guard Jon so faithfully?” Edric mused.

Sam blanched. “Guys, do me a favour? Forget this conversation for now. Don’t talk about this to anyone. Do not ask anyone any questions, not Davos, not Ser Arthur. I’ll handle it.”

“Sam?” Edric was flabbergasted.

“Promise me Edric, promise me Gendry. Trust me to handle this.” Sam urged.

Both nodded their agreement. Gendry regretted having started this strange discussion anyway.

Sam left the cabin and went to check if Jon was still awake.

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The next evening, the four of them were once more assembled in Jon’s cabin. This time however there were no cards to be seen. Gendry’s just sat there, his mouth was moving but no sound exited.

Edric stared at Jon with big unbelieving eyes. Then he turned his head and fixed his eyes on Sam. “You told on us”, he accused.

“And don’t you like the result?” Sam managed to look a bit superior for once.

After his panic last night Sam had put two and two together for the most part. He had made small observations here and there but had respected Jon’s privacy. He had even noticed dragons the first time he had seen Jon at the beach but had not been sure they belonged together. He had hesitated to interrogate a new acquaintance. Yesterday evening however he had felt it was his duty to warn his new friend that whatever he was hiding was as good as discovered.

Before Edric could react to Sam’s taunt, Gendry had found his voice again. “For real, you’re a Prince, or a King even? I already felt out of place in the company of three sons of real Lords, this is even worse. Do I have to call you your Grace?”
Sam and Edric were as eager as Gendry to see how Jon would react to these questions.

Jon smiled, he remembered Sandor Clegane making almost the exact same remark. “Of course not. Please keep calling me Jon and keep acting normal around me. I am no ruler yet so am not entitled to be called your Grace.”

“So that’s why they call you ‘My Prince’. I thought they were just teasing you with that.” Gendry was more at ease again.

“Will you tell us more?” Edric tentatively probed.

Jon looked earnestly at them. “I will. Just ask me. I’ll answer if I’m able.”

“You have a Valyrian sword?” Gendry asked.

“I do. Would you like to see it?”

“I’d very much like to hold it if I may.” Gendry asked reverently. “Does it have a name?”

Jon had taken Blackfyre out of its scabbard and held it up moving it slowly so they could admire it from every angle. “Anyone recognise it?” he asked smiling at their amazement.

“Gendry was right. It is extraordinary. It is even finer than Dawn.” Edric was jealous when he saw Jon handing it to Gendry who carefully held it in one hand and checked the balance by swinging it in the limited space.

“Can it be Blackfyre?” Sam asked. “It hardly seems possible but it looks like it.”

“It is Blackfyre. Maester Aemon had it at the Wall. He gave it to me shortly after my twelfth nameday.”

Gendry reluctantly handed the sword back to Jon. To Edric’s disappointment the sword was soon back in its scabbard and tucked away once more between Jon’s belongings.

“No further questions?” Jon asked raising his brow at Sam.

“You have pets?” Sam tried to give him an out.

“I have several.” Jon smiled and seemed at ease. “What do you think you know?”

“Well you have Ghost, a direwolf, I guess he represents your Stark side.” Sam didn’t know if he was allowed to bring up the dragons.

“What’s a direwolf?” Gendry felt out of his depth in this company in more than one way.

Jon turned his attention to Gendry and started explaining. “A direwolf is the sigil of house Stark. You probably know that the Starks are the most prominent family of the North. My uncle Eddard Stark is Warden of the North. My uncle Benjen, you have met of course when you arrived at the Driftmark, is his brother. The large albino wolf you have seen in my company is a direwolf. They are fearsome beasts mostly living in the wild, north of the Wall. But I have raised Ghost ever since he was a puppy and he is totally loyal to me. He won’t harm you, unless you mean to harm me, that is.”

“I think you were not finished yet, Sam?” Jon gently nudged him.

“Well, I couldn’t help but notice two other pets, representing your Targaryen family?” Sam hardly
dared to say it out loud.

“Dragons, Jon. He thinks you have two dragons who obey you.” Edric was ready to believe anything by now.

He grinned seeing Gendry’s reaction. The boy sat there motionless, his mouth open, trying to decide if they were toying with him or not.

“Didn’t know what you were getting yourself into, did you?” Jon teased, but he sobered when he saw Gendry look at him with doubt in his eyes.

“We’re all friends here Gendry, you just as much as these other two imps. Relax, we’ll fill up our pints and I’ll tell you my story in more detail.”

The four of them talked deep into the night.

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The next morning after breaking their fast, Jon asked Gendry to accompany him to his favourite bench at the bow of the ship. The young man immediately complied.

“How are you doing Gendry?” he opened the conversation.

“I’m fine … Jon.” Gendry hesitated on the appellation.

“No you’re not.” Jon sighed. “You know even though I became an orphan minutes after I was born, I have been lucky. I have always been cared for and have received a good education. You have not been that lucky.”

He looked at Gendry with a serious and encouragingly expression, using it to give extra credence to his next words. “You were just unlucky Gendry. You are no less than us. You also have noble blood running through your veins. You just lack the confidence and knowledge how to address certain people in certain circumstances. If you agree, I can set up some lessons with the Maester to get you started. I am sure with just some basic principles you could do a lot better in no time. You are one of us.”

“I’m just a bastard raised in Fleabottom. I’m only good with my hands.” Gendry stammered.

“How would you know for sure if you never had the opportunity to test yourself? Who knows what you can accomplish in life? Being good with numbers is only one talent. If you do not excel in that, you can excel in lots of other things. I am told Tobho Mott was impressed with your quick understanding of several complicated melting techniques he showed you. Look at Sam. Do we look down on him because he is not really a fighter? No, we give him the opportunity to develop his other talents. Did you know that once Sam has read a book, he can almost literally recite it even if it has been months since he last read it? He would make an excellent Maester, one I could trust blindly.”

“I can’t even read properly, only the simple words.” Gendry confessed.

“Nothing keeps you from learning now if that is your wish. I will not force anything on you, but think about it. If you stay with us, you can take advantage of all these opportunities I have had at my disposal my whole life. You’ll just start your education a bit later than all of us but in time nobody
will be able to tell the difference.

“And the fact that you are technically a bastard has nothing to do with you. It reflects more on your father, on your parents. They should call the fathers bastards, not the innocent babes. And do you realise, that if you stick with me, the moment I am King, I can legitimize you and grant you a lordship? So I’ll repeat my earlier words. You are one of us. If I had it my way I would outlaw the use of the word bastard anyway.”

Jon tapped his shoulder playfully. “Don’t insult your Prince by not believing him.” He teased when Gendry didn’t react.

Gendry looked at him, clearly a bit overcome. “It will take some getting used to but I really want to become something more than just a bastard. Always have. Let me get my head around this and I will let you know about possible lessons, okay?”

“That’s more than fair Gendry. Take all the time you need. I will be here for you if you have additional questions. Though about the legitimisation, I will only be able to do that if you swear yourself to my cause. Know however that if you do that, you will become part of the conspiracy to overthrow your birth father. I will understand if you will not want to do that.”

“Why wouldn’t I want that? Hells where do I sign. He tried to have me killed! That’s why I had to flee everything I knew. I really liked studying with Tobho Mott.” Jon clearly had struck a note.

“To be honest, Gendry, I do not think that King Robert was behind this murdering spree. I think it was masterminded by the Lannisters. Not that I want to defend the King, mind you. The son of a bitch murdered my half sister and half brother who was just a mere babe. He had their mother killed and is even now sending assassins to kill my aunt in Essos. If he knew I existed, I would become his target as well.”

“What are we still arguing about then?” Gendry asked. As I said I owe no loyalty to the Baratheons and will gladly swear myself to your service.”

“Well, for now, just swear to keep my secrets and help keep us all safe. Decide what you want to do about possible lessons and we’ll take it from there. You’re one of my friends Gendry. Take your time and let all of this sink in. I won’t have you make a hasty decision only to regret it afterwards. If you do decide to join our cause I want you to do so with a clear mind.”

Gendry just nodded unable to formulate a coherent reply.

Jon stood up “Come on let’s find Edric and Sam, I think this would be a good time for a sparring session.

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A few weeks later.

Again it was Davos standing on the ship’s front deck next to Jo. Both were watching the shorelines, now those of Pentos, slowly growing smaller and disappear completely.

“Mission accomplished?” Davos asked him quietly.

“It went well.” Jon replied

“And your aunt?”
"She’s so nice. It is strange that she is my aunt. She’s just a girl my age. We got along well. I feel responsible for her. I promised to bring her to Westeros as soon as it is safe.” Jon felt a bit shy talking about Daenerys so he kept his answers brief.

“I’m happy for you it went well Jon.” Davos was determined not to pry any further. He knew Jon would open up to him in his own time.

“And Harry Strickland? How did that meeting go?” he was really curious about that.

“Didn’t Ser Gerold tell you all about it?” Jon stalled.

“No, I didn’t ask him. I prefer to hear it from you.” Davos answered sincerely.

“Well, perhaps we should make ourselves comfortable then. Jon sat down on a bench his eyes still gazing at the small stripe of land that would be invisible before long.

Davos followed his example and lowered himself in the empty spot close to Jon.

“You heard about how he came up to our table at the tavern during our second night in Pentos?” Jon asked not knowing where to begin his story.

“Not really. Why did he approach you?” Davos enquired.

“Well, we were seated around a large table, all of us that is Ser Arthur, Ser Gerold, Sandor Clegane, Edric, Sam, Gendry and yours truly of course. I thought at the time something we said must have attracted Strickland’s attention. Ser Arthur told me later he had noticed the man studying us for some time before coming over to introduce himself.”

Jon hesitated. “Perhaps it was stupid of me but I didn’t think anyone would recognise the sword. You see, I was carrying Blackfyre. Well when Strickland approached and introduced himself, Ser Arthur immediately realised this man was the commander of the Golden Company. When Strickland asked where I got that sword I was carrying, Ser Arthur took him aside and forcibly ordered Strickland to swear upon his honour not to harm any of us. He only invited him to sit down at our table after he had done so sincerely enough to satisfy my Kingsguard and even then not before Strickland had agreed to surrender his own sword for the duration of our conversation.”

Jon’s eyes wandered briefly to where Pentos had still been visible before they started this conversation. The coastline could no longer be seen with the naked eye. Jon returned his gaze to Davos and resumed his account.

“Edric, Sam and Gendry had retired to their room after a slight prodding of Ser Gerold. We tried to give Strickland a censured but moving version of my background. Of course we had sworn him to secrecy for the time being.”

“I believed him when he promised not to betray our secret until we were ready to reveal my true identity to the realm and fight for my claim. Ser Arthur tried to coax him to reveal where his loyalties would lie should money not be an issue, but he wouldn’t give anything away. Jon turned his head to Davos, and looked him firmly in the eye. He really wanted Davis to believe his next statement.

“I know I struck a note when I told him about my two dragons at the end. I could read his empathy for our cause from his face although he didn’t utter a word.”

“What?” Davos couldn’t help but react. “How could you do that? He has an army of at least ten thousand men at his disposal. He could easily kill you and capture your dragons!”

“I didn’t tell him where they are, or where we lived, Davos.” Jon stayed calm. Somehow he had felt he could trust Strickland. “I told you it was a lean version of the story. For all he knows the dragons
could be anywhere in Westeros.”

“I don’t like it all the same”, Davos replied.

“They would have to come by ship. You know we have shored up our defences. If an enemy ship draws near, my dragons can set it afire before it has the chance to throw anchor. Don’t worry. Even Ser Arthur is convinced that he won’t fight against us. At worst he will stay neutral. At best we have sown the seeds to persuade him to lend us his support. Ser Arthur hopes Blackfyre could well be the best inducement to convince him to our side.”

“You’re not giving up the sword!”

“No Davos, I misspoke. I meant the fact that I am the true owner of the sword, one with Targaryen blood. According to Ser Arthur, the fact that I am only half Targaryen is in my favour as well. I’m almost a Blackfyre myself. The dragons are just the icing on the cake. Perhaps you should talk about this with Ser Arthur?” Jon tried to appease him.

“I certainly will. But first tell me, how did you part company with Strickland?” Davos was calmer now.

“His exact word were and I quote ‘I wish you good fortune in the wars to come your Grace’ end of quote. His tone seemed to imply that he recognised my claim and would not accept an offer to take up arms against us, however much the gold they would promise him.”

“That’s all?” Davos was not reassured.

“Well, I sort of made him promise that if they approached him, he would contact us first before making a decision.” Jon had held on this titbit of information as long as possible and relished the brief look of shock that crossed Davos’ face.

“He’d better.” Davos grumbled and left Jon’s side. He would go and speak with Ser Arthur now.

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Jon closed his eyes and tried to search for his dragons. His was once more standing at the bow of the ship. Davos had just informed him they would probably arrive at the Driftmark tomorrow and had left him shortly after. Knowing Davos, the man had probably guessed what Jon was trying to do and had given him privacy.

‘Not close enough yet. I will try again in an hour or so.’ He saw Sandor approach. He smiled encouragingly. He always enjoyed his conversations with the man.

“Enjoying the sea air?” Jon looked at his weathered face.

“Getting used to it.” Came the muttered reply. You will be glad to see your wolf again, boy?”

“I will.” Jon imitated his brief conversation style.

“Boring trip. Didn’t have to do shit. Why the fuck did I come along?”

“Well, you refused to spar with me.” Jon argued.
“You have your fine knights lining up for that. I do not need no fucking cuddling!”

“Whose whinging now?” Jon grinned trying to show Clegane that he was just teasing.

“I’m not whinging.” The large man replied trying to keep a straight face.

Jon had anticipated this reply and had his answer ready.

“Well to quote a certain friend of mine: your lips are moving and you complain about something, that’s whinging.” Jon finished quoting Clegane’s own words.

That did it, they looked at each other and both shook with laughter.

After they had both calmed down, Clegane patted his shoulder. “You’re alright kid.” Jon watched him leave, knowing he had improved his protector’s mood significantly.

He focussed his mind once more, trying to reach further and further towards their destination. Suddenly he felt it. It was a light nudge, but it was there. He tried to keep his elation in check and concentrated once more. He emptied his mind and responded to the nudge. Now he could feel the two of them. It felt like they had been dozing but he could feel their excitement building.

Jon looked at the sky. It was very cloudy today, perfect. ‘I’m almost home’, he called out to them in his mind. ‘If you promise to be careful and fly above the clouds, you can come to me. I would love to see you again.’ He felt them get up, leave the cave and take to the sky.

Now he focussed his attention on the green dragon. ‘Rhaegal, when you are close enough, will you let me share your mind, please? I would love to see the sea and our ship from high up. You know I would love to be able to fly as you two can.’ Jon felt Rhaegal’s positive energy floating through him. He knew Rhaegal had just agreed.

It was not long before Jon could feel Rhaegal was close enough for him to warg. He had used the time it had taken the dragons to come into range to fetch Ser Gerold. Warging a dragon took a lot of energy and he had promised that if the circumstances allowed for it, he would always arrange for supervision. He had been obliged to admit that when in full warg mode, he wasn’t able to protect himself. There was a big difference between just giving mental orders to the dragons or fully warg with Rhaegal.

Ser Gerold stood over him, looking a bit anxious. Jon seated on the now familiar bench on deck gave him a reassuring smile and closed his eyes.

It didn’t take him long before he was soaring above the clouds. Rhaegal welcomed him. The dragon was really glad to feel their bond again. Jon could sense how the both of them had missed him. They hadn’t seen each other for more than three sennights. ‘I am happy too. You can come along on my next trip. I don’t want to be away from you for so long either. But promise you will behave and not put yourselves in danger.’ Warm acceptance greeted him. ‘Come on let’ s take a dive and see what’s down there.’ Rhaegel immediately complied, Viserion followed his brother.

Jon felt exhilarated. The view really was amazing. The sea reached for as far as his eyes could see in all directions. He focussed east, looking for a ship. There it was. He urged Rhaegal to approach. Then he squinted. Was that his ship? It looked like another boat was down there. Then he saw his own ship. Jon was not well versed in the art of navigating a ship and he was certainly no master at estimating distances and speed at sea yet. His best guess was that both vessels were destined to cross
each other before the sun reached its highest point.

He forgot about the danger of discovery and flew closer to determine whether the other ship posed a threat to them. When he was close enough he recognized the banner of the pirates Sam had described to him. He had asked Harry Strickland if he knew who these pirates were and the commander had warned him about them. They were well known and feared in Pentos. They had the reputation of ferocious fighters and were known to take prisoners to sell them as slaves.

What were they doing so close to Westeros? Rhaegal could feel his anger towards that ship and before Jon knew it, he had seemingly given Rhaegal the impression they would attack.

Rhaegal dove towards the ship, Viserion at his tail. Both dragons released their fire, each putting a different part of the ship aflame. Jon felt overwhelmed by the heat that he felt flowing through Rhaegal. ‘Up, up’, he ordered them. Luckily Rhaegal complied and soon they were flying above the clouds.

Jon broke the connection to Rhaegal. He blinked a few times and saw Ser Gerold’s relief. It was however short lived when Jon immediately cried out: “Ser Gerold, call Davos! We need to change course. There’s a pirate ship on fire. It will be severely crippled by now. We need to see if we can save the innocents on board. If Strickland was right, they may have hostages.”

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Later, when the sun was no longer up.

“What the hell were you thinking boy? Where you thinking at all?” Jon had never seen Davos loose his composure like this.

“I’m sorry Davos. I apologise to all of you. Is Ser Arthur all right?”

“A fucking Ironborn”, Clegane muttered. “Ser Arthur almost got killed saving the cunt of a female Kraken. Don’t you fucking look at me that way boy. That was a dumb thing to do.”

“I know”, Jon agreed. “It all happened so fast, one moment I was recognising that banner and feeling mad about the destruction of Sam’s ship, the other moment the dragons had already decided to help me by attacking.” He looked over to his audience. Everyone had shown up for the debriefing.

He tried to justify himself. “I told you I lacked battle practice. I warned you that using the dragons in battle would take some training. Well here is your proof. I need to learn how they react. I certainly will do all I can to teach them to wait for a more explicit order from me before reacting, especially before burning people.”

“Please tell me how Ser Arthur is doing? Can I see him?”

“He’s resting now”, Ser Gerold took pity on his Prince. “He will be all right in time. He took a nasty wound to his sword arm. It required several stitches and he needed milk of the poppy. He’s sleeping it off now.”

“Why in the Gods’ names were you fighting on the front lines? You could have gotten yourself killed.” Davos looked more worried than angry now. “Are you alright? Did you get hurt?”

“Just a small cut. I’m fine.” Jon looked at Davos with an earnest expression on his face. “I started the
battle Davos. Perhaps not on purpose but it was my fault there was a battle at all. When those pirates charged at us, I could not let others risk their lives because of my actions. I could not just sit back and watch. I was trying to fix my own bloody mistake!”

Ser Gerold tried to be the voice of reason. “Calm down Jon, your outburst doesn’t help us any further.”

He addressed everyone now.

“Let’s all sit down and tell each other our part of the battle. This will help us learn from what happened and find ways to coordinate our actions better in future. It will also help us to calm down.”

Ser Gerold had fought his fair share of battles and knew nothing helped as much to ease a soldier’s conscience than the opportunity to talk through his experiences.

What had happened? They had approached the ship and seen the pirates’ efforts to try to put out the fire, but the ship was already far too damaged to reach the shore. Two of their masts were completely destroyed. When the pirates spotted their ship they saw their chance for survival. They just had to take the other ship by force. Their numbers had dwindled because several had been killed outright by the initial fire bursts and others were no longer in fighting condition. The ones that were left knew their chances were slim and had fought as if the devil possessed them.

Ser Arthur had followed Jon who had jumped right into the fray. In an effort to shield his Prince he had taken on two men at once. He had been able to hold them off but a third one had jumped in and sliced his sword arm. Jon who fought beside him had prevented worse by stabbing Blackfyre in the attacker’s neck. Clegane had appeared out of nowhere bringing several crew members with him. The latter had extracted the wounded Ser Arthur and brought him to Sam. Clegane had stayed and fought firmly at Jon’s side.

Minutes later the fight was over. No pirates remained alive. The pirates had fought to the last man. On Jon’s end everyone had done their share of killing. Their crew had proven themselves battle worthy. Ser Gerold had shown once more that he was not too old yet and had fought efficiently. Clegane had been fearsome to behold. If they would have kept count, he would surely have had the highest body count.

Edric and Gendry could boast they had lived through a real live battle and had killed a pirate between the two of them. Sam had seen most of this happen from where he guarded the door to the cabin where the Maester, the cook and a few younger servants had been assembled for safety. Ser Gerold had had the presence of mind to shout to Sam to perform that task. He had realised he had to give Sam an honourable task that kept him away from the battle. The young man’s training sessions were not that successful.

Afterwards Ser Gerold and a few crew members had boarded the crippled ship and discovered a hostage who had been brought on deck before the fighting started. She later told them they had done that because her small prison was too close to the fire. Jon had been baffled. They had risked their lives for one single hostage? At first glance the woman looked like a low born in filthy combat clothing. But she immediately identified herself as Yara Greyjoy then she had urged them to search below deck for she knew of at least two other female prisoners. They had eventually rescued three women. The additional two they found below deck turned out to be kidnapped pleasure slaves.

When Jon had learned the identity of Yara Greyjoy and realised she was a sister of Theon, member
of house Greyjoy the ruling house of Pyke, he had decided to leave the shackles on her hands and feet for the time being. He had ordered his men to lock her up below deck. He would interrogate her later once order had been restored. He had given the cabin Sam, Edric and Gendry shared to the two female slaves and had ordered his friends to put their belongings in his room. It would be crowded but if all went well it would be just for this one last night. They would reach the Driftmark early tomorrow morning.

All the bodies of the pirates had been returned to the burning ship. Rhaegal and Viserion had flown down once more to complete the destruction of the vessel. Soon the ship had sunk. Jon had ordered his dragons back to the shore, reassuring them he would be with them soon. He was coming home. Then they had given a sea burial to the one casualty they had suffered, according to the man’s dying wish. Jon had known him personally. He had helped train him on the Driftmark. He had been a kind man. Jon remembered talking to him about his children. He made a mental note to see to it that they were taken care of. It would ease his guilt a bit.

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“It was entirely my uncle’s doing.” Yara had admitted after some prodding from Jon and Davos.

She was sitting on what Jon thought of as ‘his bench’ on the front deck, Davos and Jon were looming over her. Ser Gerold stood next to her, watching her every move. Jon could see Clegane standing a bit further away hands on the railing of the ship staring intently into the water. He was trying very hard to pretend that he was not listening carefully to every single word of the interrogation.

“You mean your own family wants to get you killed?” Jon did not feel very favourable towards a sister of Theon Greyjoy.

“My uncle is, Euron Greyjoy. He is a younger brother of my father who has left us years ago to make his fortune at sea. Apparently he has been somewhat successful since he told me of the fleet he has assembled. He plans to kill our father and rule the Iron Islands himself. We would be a threat to his claim. He spread the word of a significant reward offered for the capture of his niece and or nephew. The pirates were on their way to uncle Euron to hand me over and claim the reward.” Yara told all this in a boring tone.

“How much are you worth?” Jon baited her. “I could get my hands on your dick of a brother you know.”

“Theon, you know Theon?” Yara showed some feeling for the first time in the conversation.

“I know him. Can’t say I like him though. I once suffered his company for two sennights when I visited Winterfell.” Jon revealed

“What’s your name boy. I want to know who I will offend.”

“Never mind my name.” Jon said.

“Well then, tell me at least how you defeated these pirates. I must say I am impressed.”

“The fire helped.” Jon tried to evade.
“If that was your doing, you should teach me how you did it. When I was brought above deck by the pirates, your ship was still at some distance. How did you manage to set fire to the ship from so far away?”

“And have the Ironborn use our tactics against us. I don’t think so.” Jon was relieved she had not seen the dragons’ initial attack. He had made sure that only loyal men remained on deck when the dragons had swooped down once more to complete the ship’s destruction. Yara had already been safely locked up below deck.

“You won’t tell me your name. You won’t tell me how you defeated a very famous pirate. Will you tell me why I am in chains at least?” Yara tried once more to get some information out of the younger man.

“Just know that I hate the Ironborn. I hate your way of life. You reave and pillage, rape and kill, and are proud of it. ‘Paying the Iron Price’ it what you call it? How do you even begin to justify yourselves?” He ended his tirade with this rhetorical question.

“I don’t.”

For the first time Jon really looked at her. It looked like she had meant what she just said.

“What?”

“I have a small following, Ironborn who want to turn away from the ‘Old Way’ as we call it. We want to settle down and live from trade and do some of our own farming. Trade could make us rich. We are the best at sea. But my father won’t support me. I’ve been trying to recruit more men and want to remove my father from power without killing him. I have even been playing with the idea to fetch Theon one way or another.”

She now looked at Jon.

“Are you in charge of this vessel? We could strike a deal you know?”

Jon didn’t know how to react to this. He just got up and ordered his men to give her something to eat and drink. Afterwards they should lock her up again.

Jon saw Sandor immediately volunteered for the task of escorting Yara Greyjoy back below deck. He forcefully took her arm and started to drag her away. Jon couldn’t hear what Yara said but Sandor’s reply rang loud and clear.

“Stop flapping yer gums, bitch. We do not need to hear your fucking whinging.”

A small smile ghosted over Jon’s lips. Leave it to Sandor to provide him a small moment of comic relief. The man really had a way with words.

“Ser Gerold, I’m going to look in on Ser Arthur. I will release him from the company of Edric, Sam and Gendry. I know he will love to have me visit.” Jon was in sore need of advice.

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Ser Arthur sat on the bed his back supported by a bundle of furs. He looked at his young charge who sat brooding on a small chair a few feet away.

“Stop blaming yourself, Jon” he reprimanded. “Use this experience as a valuable lesson.”
Jon looked at Ser Arthur. “I pray your sword arm will soon be totally functional again. I want to apologise once more.”

“You know”, Ser Arthur answered, “I once was hailed as the best Swordsman in Westeros. I do not tell you that to boast, just to teach you something. Even the very best fighter can get killed if he is grossly outnumbered. I can take on two men, sometimes more if the circumstances are in my favour, but I would not survive if several men simultaneously tried to kill me.”

He looked over to Jon. “This is a valuable lesson Jon. Either you try to find a location where they cannot come at you from all sides, or you fight in formation. That’s what we are going to focus on as soon as we reach land. We are going to teach you to fight with one or more fighters backing you.”

“Depending on the situation you can fight side by side, or back to back. If you are surrounded from all sides and there are several of you, you can form a protective circle so nobody’s back can be attacked. The more familiar you are with the men fighting beside you, the easier it will be to synchronise your fighting moves. Agree on simple signs so everyone knows in the blink of an eye what to do, which opponent to take on and so on. Perhaps I have been remiss in your training.”

“I couldn’t have had a better teacher.” Jon replied instantly. “I was scared during battle, I’ll admit that but I didn’t hesitate. I instinctively knew which tactics to use, how to swing when to use lethal force. I would not have been as efficient if it wasn’t for you. Your lessons are what kept me alive out there.”

“It would have been stupid not to be scared my Prince. Those men were some of the fiercest opponents I have ever faced. They were as battle hardened as they come. They have spent their lives fighting at sea. What’s more they were desperate. Our ship was their last chance to survive. Compared to these men some large battles I fought were a piece of cake. During the rebellion I faced farmers who had been given swords in their hands and hardly had any fighting experience.”

Ser Arthur saw his Prince shift in his seat. “As a first battle, you have not had it easy. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

“It’s not about that. It’s about how I got us involved in this battle in the first place.” Jon said filled with remorse.

“Who’s to say they would not have attacked anyway? You said yourself their ship was about to cross ours. If they had decided to attack and they had not been weakened by the dragonfire first, the battle could have been much tougher. No Jon, try not to dwell too much on the what ifs but go forward with the situation at hand. Like I said, it happened. Deal with it. Learn from it.”

“I’ll try”, Jon answered demurely. “Now, what to do about Yara Greyjoy?”

“Set her free? What else would you do with her?” Ser Arthur asked perplexed.

“I have been thinking about what she told me. She claims to have forsworn the Old Ways and has some followers. If we want to sue for peace with the Ironborn and not worry about them attacking our shores, perhaps she is our solution. I’d like to talk to her some more.”

“I don’t know Jon. Don’t reveal too much. Perhaps you should let someone else lead the interrogation. If I was her, I would question why a sixteen year old boy is the leader of some very experienced fighters. Do not raise her suspicion and do not let her see the dragons.”

“Yeah, about that, we were lucky she didn’t see them.” Jon admitted.
"If she disembarks at the Driftmark we will have to be careful." Ser Arthur pondered the problem. "Best put her on another ship immediately. There surely will be one leaving in a direction of her choice."

"You would just let her go? Not try to plant the seeds of a future alliance? You know we have something she seems to want. That pain in the ass Theon is her brother." Jon stressed once more.

"I don’t know Jon. I do not trust the Ironborn. But let’s ask what the others think about this. Gods know we need to find a solution for the constant nuisance the Ironborn cause. I would be very glad to never see any ever again!"

"Do you need anything? Can I get you anything before I retire?" Jon asked.

‘I’m not an invalid Jon. It is just my arm that’s wounded. Now that I’m no longer drugged with that nasty milk of the poppy, I can fend for myself. I order you to leave me alone.’ Ser Arthur made a move to get up.

Jon immediately grabbed his good arm when he stumbled. “It seems you will need some more rest before you can order me around again.” A worried look belied the teasing words. “Get well Arthur”, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Interlude 8: You’ve got mail

Jon,

I hope you’re still doing well? I enjoyed reading your last letter. I’m looking forward to getting to know Edric Dayne. We should all meet up sometime. I’ve been thinking that the Riverlands could be a perfect location. Both of us would only need to travel half the distance. Everyone would think I’m visiting my mother’s family and I could introduce you to them. It’s really been too long since I’ve last had the opportunity to beat you in one game or another.

I know you always ask about Ghost’s siblings. Well then, it will be your own fault if my letter bores you to death. Once I begin talking about those wonderful pets, I’m hardly able to stop. If Gods forbid we ever loose contact, I will have a constant reminder of you by my side. Greywind is my best and closest companion and every time I sense his presence I feel safe and whole. I am even more grateful now I realise that I only have him because of you fighting tooth and nail against the combined reluctance of uncle Benjen and your guards. Yes, I finally wriggled the entire story from him.

Mother is still not too pleased with you. As I have written to you before, you are the one she blames for every nuisance the direwolves cause at Winterfell.

A few days ago, Shaggydog, you remember the silly name Rickon gave his wolf once he was old enough to do so, ruined a tablecloth, one mother and Sansa had worked on for ages. They had embroidered it with five direwolves’ heads. I must admit it is a shame that it is ruined. The embroidered heads were beautiful renditions of our pets. Mother does speak true when she claims Rickon’s wolf is the worst of the litter. We’ve all promised father we would help Rickon train Shaggydog from now on.

I’ve written before of father’s initial reaction to the wolves. You know he was reluctant at first but he
has come around. He defends their presence to mother nowadays. He even goes as far as to praise you for gifting them to us. He tells her that she should be thankful to you, that the wolves will be the best protection her children will ever have. Their instincts are impeccable and their loyalty is unparalleled. Last night during dinner, he even told us stories of the Starks of old who rode into battle next to their giant direwolves. And for the first time I saw something in mother’s expression that made me hopeful that she will relent in time.

My siblings on the other hand still revere the ground you walk on. They are all very attached to their pets. It is strange to see how the wolves adapt themselves to the personality of their masters. It has made me wonder whether there is perhaps another explanation. Did the direwolves somehow choose the Stark sibling best suited their personality? Knowing you, you will try to convince me of the latter.

Anyway you should see Lady. That’s Sansa’s direwolf. I’ve never seen a pet that is so well behaved. Lady walks as elegantly as Sansa, she is always dignified never dirty. Arya’s wolf, Nymeria, is as fearless as she is. Shaggydog is as wild an untamed as Rickon and Summer is as calm as Bran. I’m not sure I’m the one to describe the similarities between Greywind and myself. I would prefer to wait until you see the two of us interact together and let you tell me. Yet another reason why we should meet soon. I know, I promised in my last letter that I would stop ‘winging’ – I like that word by the way – but I am determined to continue whinging until you relent. What I will tell you about Greywind is that he seems to be growing even bigger than I thought possible. I can not begin to guess how much he eats since he mostly hunts at night.

And how are things with Ghost? Are you doing ‘your thing’ with him? Never mind, why am I even asking? I know you do! I’d love to see you two together. I have never seen an albino with red eyes before. I can just picture the both of you, brooding together in a corner of your room. So please? I will say no more, at least not for a few paragraphs.

I’m glad there was a sixth puppy. Uncle Benjen told us you found it after you had already decided these ones were for us. You know this makes you a part of our pack, don’t you? Wolves have strong family ties. So by adopting a sibling of our direwolves, you’ve officially been made a member of the Stark pack. I loved the description uncle Benjen gave us of your direwolf.

I wanted to ask you something though. Perhaps it is all your tales of seeing through an animal’s eyes that got stuck in my subconscious, but I have started to have these dreams where I see things from Greywind’s perspective. Everything has this yellow hue. In my dreams I run through the woods and hunt game. Sometimes I wake up and the taste of blood still lingers on my tongue. When you bond with Ghost and see through his eyes, is everything tinted red because of his eye colour? I know it sounds ridiculous but I can’t help wonder whether there is a chance that what I experience is real and not just a dream but that I sort of bond with Greywind at night?

Gods, I really wished we could just speak about this and let our wolves meet each other as well. I know Greywind would like you. Please Jon, if you harass them at your end and I whine enough here, they will have to give in eventually and I can finally see you again and get some very much needed advice.

Theon has been a pain in my ass again … The letter went on for a bit. Robb described at length the increased lesson plan he apparently needed as future Warden of the North. He told his father took pains to teach him personally about politics and diplomacy.
Robb ended however as always with a small part that Arya had dictated. She always wanted to send a personal greeting Jon.

Hey Jon, when are you finally coming back to Winterfell? I really want to introduce you to Nymeria. I am ever so grateful you gifted her to me. I also want you to see how much progress I made with my bow. I am learning to fight with a sword in secret. Robb is teaching me when mother isn’t there. He says I am already better than Bran, but I must keep it a secret. Hope to see you again very soon.

Robb says you are like an adopted brother now you have Ghost. I really like that idea. So I end this message with greetings from your adopted sister, Arya xxx

Well Jon, that’s it for now. Father asks me to sends you greetings from him and mother. I’m sure if my other siblings knew of this letter, I would have to relay theirs as well.

I challenge you to reply with an equally long message and with a firm plan in place to meet soon!

Your loyal but impatient friend
Robb
PS forgot to mention Greywind sends some licks as well.

***

Jon,

It was nice to receive another letter so soon after your last one. I’m glad you still find the time in your busy schedule to write to me. I enjoy reading about your adventures and no, your letter wasn’t boring because of its length. I enjoyed every word and am already looking forward to the next one.

I hope it will contain more stories about those pets of yours, all of them. I love hearing about Ghost. I’m still mad at you for not bringing any of them along. I understand why you didn’t mostly, but not about Ghost. Since I have read that you brought him along on the rest of your journey, it seems your excuse that he would not take to being on a ship was makes no sense. Your next letter better have an explanation young man! Just kidding. Maybe?

I’m counting the days till you can send that ship for me and my life can become an adventure as well. I have not much news to report. Nothing really happens here. The weather is still as hot as ever. The city is very peaceful.

Have you ever heard of the Lord of Light? Lately some priestesses have come close to where I live to spread this religion. Their most famous slogan is “For the night is dark and full of terrors”. It appears they worship a God of fire. Perhaps this God has some affinity with Targaryens? Anyway, I will be searching for a book or scroll about this R’hlor, or Red God as he is also called, so I can send it to you. When I heard their slogan for the first time, I couldn’t help but think of that tale I read about the Long Night in one of your books with old folk tales of the North. That Night certainly was dark and full of terrors.

Speaking of your books, I have already read a third of them. The beautiful tome detailing the history of house Targaryen lies beside my bed. I reread a few pages in it every night before I go to sleep. Somehow I like going to sleep thinking about us Targaryens.

I recently received a disturbing letter from uncle Aemon. It seems trouble is really stirring at the Wall. I hope your Stark uncles are informed of this and have already taken action. If not, will you see to it
that help is sent to the Wall? I wouldn’t want uncle Aemon to be in danger. I am praying every day
that he will live long enough so we can meet in person one day.

Anyway, I am going to close this letter now so the messenger can be on his way. He will have
finished his meal by now. I’m already looking forward to your next letter.

Please be careful and stay healthy. My thoughts are with you every day.
Sincerely,
Daenerys Targaryen

***

Robb,
Brief message because sent by Raven. I’m planning a sea journey and will leave in a few moons.
Will schedule stop at Stony Shore. Particulars follow soon. Hope to meet you there. Have you heard
from uncle Benjen recently? If so please let me know when you send the raven back.
Your best friend

***

My Prince,
I sincerely hope this message finds you well. Please relay my greetings to my dear friend the
honourable knight as well.
On that subject, if you allow women in your Kingsguard let me know. I have trained my beautiful
daughters well. Talking about daughters, let me know when you start thinking of taking a queen. I’d
only be too happy to let you have your pick. You know I have eight don’t you?

Everything is well in Dorne. One of my sandsnakes is in the Reach doing her thing. Varys and I are
enjoying thwarting Littlefinger as much as we can. I’ll let Varys make the effort to encrypt the
lengthy details of our scheming and send them to you. But know I played an important part in them.
Varys will perhaps forget to mention that.

I fear somehow we are missing something though. We recently found out Littlefinger sent ravens to
The Freys in the Riverlands and The Ironborn. According to Varys this was not on the orders of the
King or the small council. We were too late to intercept them and have no clue what they contain.
Best be wary. I will write again when I have more news.

I look forward to seeing you sometime soon, I heard you have improved your fighting somewhat.
You owe me a spar, I have a long memory. I will want at least one session with you wielding a
longspear! I’ll enjoy seeing you bite the dust several times my boy.

I hope the content of this message will make some sense. That would mean I will have successfully
used this ridiculous code that’s giving me head aches.
Keep well, my honourable friend,
Prince Oberyn Martell,
The Red Viper of Dorne

Interlude 9: Renly

Kings Landing, a lavish villa not far from the Red Keep.

“Perfect”, Prince Oberyn was congratulating himself. Varys really has come through. Now it was his move.

As the front door opened, Prince Oberyn convincingly charmed the guard into believing he was there on personal invitation of the guest of honour. He was granted entrance at once. Inside he saw Renly Baratheon seated at the head of the table, flanked by his squire, Loras Tyrell, and a tall knight. He looked again, not a knight, it seemed to be a woman in armour.

‘Varys is right. We will kill two birds with one stone.’ Oberyn scanned all the occupants of the room. As presumed King Robert was noticeably absent from his youngest sibling’s nameday feast.

Prince Oberyn studied Renly Baratheon’s reaction when he noticed him approach. He didn’t have a welcoming look on his face. He just stared at Oberyn with wary eyes. Oberyn bowed lightly and greeted the Prince. Renly Baratheon couldn’t break protocol and accepted the elaborate greeting with a mere nod of his head. He seemed to hesitate but then decided to address his uninvited guest.

“I didn’t now we were expecting you, Prince Oberyn. Allow me to introduce my two table partners, my squire Loras of house Tyrell and the lady Brienne of Tarth who has sworn her sword to me.” Oberyn immediately heard the slight slur in these words and realised Baratheon was already a bit drunk.

The introduced couple nodded their heads to him. Oberyn greeted Loras with a cold nod then addressed the lady. “I didn’t know Tarth also had the culture of teaching woman to fight as we do in Dorne?” he was intrigued now.

“They don’t”, Brienne of Tarth started to respond but was stopped by a cold look from Baratheon.

Oberyn tried to break the tension by his theatrical offering of a gift to Renly. He saw Renly hesitate before the Prince stumbled some thanks and accepted the small package.

“Your welcome, Prince Renly. It is the newest smelling liquid our Maesters have come up with. It will be so expensive that few men will be able to buy it. You should try it. It is the best you will have ever smelled.”

Oberyn knew Prince Renly was famous for the care he took of his attire and person. He couldn’t help but grin inwardly when he saw the Baratheon’s immediate interest. Renly opened the delicate bottle and smelled it. A pleased expression crossed his face.
“Don’t be shy”, your Royal Highness, “Feel free to try it on. Everyone will be jealous as soon as they notice how enticingly you smell.” He knew Renly’s would relish the opportunity to attract some of this almost exclusively male audience he had invited.

Oberyn used the moment of goodwill he had created. “My Prince, I would like to pay you a visit tomorrow. We both could benefit from better relations between Dorne and the Stormlands. More importantly we can show our brothers that their stubbornness in clinging to these old grudges is stupid and that us younger brothers are always the ones cleaning up their messes.”

He knew his subtle manipulation had paid off when Renly Baratheon granted him a visit on the morrow.

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Prince Oberyn couldn’t help but be smug. He had executed his part of the plan flawlessly. He had returned to the villa the next morning, making sure to bring a delegation with him. Plenty of witnesses had seen Renly Baratheon lying passed out on his bed, next to his young squire. Both men were naked. The room still reeked of sex. Gold cloaks had been summoned and both men were taken to the black cells at the discretion of the King.

Oberyn had put his time at the citadel to good use. Although he had not had the patience to stay on and forge more links, his studies there had not only given him a good knowledge of poison, he had also learned about drugs and stimulants. It had been easy adding a powerful libido enhancer to the perfume he had offered Renly Baratheon the night before. The poor man never stood a chance. Oberyn was sure the nameday celebration would not have lasted much longer after he left. Poor Loras looked like he had been sodomised thoroughly and repeatedly. He was sure everyone had observed the squire’s red arse and the amount of seed still dripping from the abused hole.

Oberyn had stressed everyone to keep Loras Tyrell’s involvement a secret until King Robert decreed him a victim or a guilty party. Now it was Varys’ and Eddard Stark’s turn. They would need to convince King Robert to disinherit Renly without killing him. Varys would caution him about exposing Loras, a scion of the leading house of the Reach and would stall him long enough for Eddard Stark to use his influence on his erstwhile foster brother.

It was essential to their scheme that the Warden of the North could take credit for the saving of the popular Tyrell’s life. He would also take credit for being instrumental in keeping this embarrassment to House Tyrell from being known throughout the realm. Of course most of the credit should go to Oberyn and some to Varys. They were the ones who really had pulled their weight. For Oberyn it was enough that his fellow conspirators knew they owed him.

‘A job well done.’ Oberyn praised himself once more.

Eddard Stark would make a seemingly very charitable offer to take Loras north to Winterfell. He could provide him shelter until the rumours died down and the people would be distracted by another scandal. In reality they had taken another step towards their goal to convince the Reach to their side. If need be they had secured themselves a hostage.
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter a short stay at the Driftmark will teach Jon many things.
Rite of passage - part 2

Chapter Summary

A short stay at the Driftmark will teach Jon many things. Then they travel overland to Seagard where ships will convey them to the Stony Shore. In Kingslanding, Tyrion tries to talk some sense into his siblings.

Chapter Notes

Rite of passage is not over yet, Jon has still has ‘many things’ to learn. The chapter turned into the longest yet. It contains 18000 words

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment Jon left the ship, a big white direwolf jumped on him almost toppling him over. Ghost licked his face enthusiastically. Jon let him continue for a short time before ordering him down. The harbour looked busy. Ships were being loaded. Others were discharging their cargo for transit.

The last fifteen years the Driftmark had prospered. Not only had the island seen a substantial increase in trade, the ships that were being built had given every able men who wanted to work a safe and well paying job. The number of smallfolk had increased. Most families had encouraged their members who had emigrated because of lack of employment, to return.

Jon had become a popular figure. Everybody knew of the little orphan that had come to live among them. When he returned at the age of twelve, they had been wary of the albino direwolf at first. The beast had grown larger than any wolf they had ever seen and the red eyes and white fur made it stand out even more. But the boy and his wolf were welcome everywhere now. Ghost didn’t attack their livestock. If anything he helped chase away the usual predators. Besides, the youth kept his animal well in check.

It certainly helped that most of them were aware that Jon Celtigar’s northern relatives had a hand in the improved situation at the Driftmark. Jon’s easy going personality did the rest to ensure the goodwill and loyalty of the smallfolk. Nobody wanted any harm to come to the boy who had become one of them. They were very protective of him. If some of them suspected he was more than he claimed to be, they kept it a secret. The population of the Driftmark had always been loyal to the Targaryens, most of them originating from Old Valyria themselves.

Jon saw several people stop what they were doing to watch his wolf’s antics and greeted them smiling in all directions. He then turned around and went over to join his friends. They had decided to walk to the small settlement. They welcomed the exercise since everyone was still suffering from muscle stiffness caused by the battle. Ser Arthur however was on horseback. His wound was still troubling him. Ser Davos accompanied him, glad to have an excuse to ride instead of walk.

Ghost ran up to welcome Jon’s friends and guards.
“Keep your wolf back boy.” Clegane grumbled doing his best to act displeased all the while knowing that Jon wouldn’t be fooled.

“Ghost, to me.” Jon ordered and Ghost immediately complied.

“At least this bastard does as he is told.” Clegane approved

“For all I know Ghost’s parents were married.” Jon joked. Then his expression sobered. “I can’t guarantee how he will react when I send him into battle though. He could very well be my fiercest defender.”

“As he fucking should be.” Clegane retorted.

“Tell me again why you won’t let us knight you? You’ve certainly earned it. Your quick actions not only saved Ser Arthur’s life but probably mine and many others as well.”

“I’m good at killing. That makes me no fucking knight. ‘Ser’ Sandor would have to behave according to all the shit rules of that dumb court protocol. I ain’t doing shit like that. If you’re tired of addressing me as Clegane you can call me Sandor. What’s your fucking problem anyway?”

“I would like to make you an official member of my Kingsguard. I want everyone to see the role you’ve earned by my side so you get the immediate respect of the nobles and smallfolk.”

Clegane tilted his head with a peculiar look on his face. “Well aren’t I already a part of it? And here I thought you were planning on improving this shit world? Surely you can loosen up some stupid rules a long dead cunt instated hundreds of years ago?”

Jon’s face lightened immediately. “You’re not only a good fighter, you’re a genius Sandor! As of now you are Sandor, the fourth member of my Kingsguard. I’ll have Gendry create some badges for the four of you. I want people to know at first sight you have an important function very close to their Prince, soon to be King if the Gods will it. Besides, Princess Daenerys gave me some beautiful designs. I’ll make an official statement once the badges are ready.”

“Nothing too fancy, I warn you boy.”

“Best stop calling me boy though. I’m afraid that’s one rule I am going to force on you.” Jon teased.

“I’ll try, my dearest Prince, but will probably fuck it up once in a while.” Sandor teased back.

“I can live with that.” Jon laughed now. “It could help if you found a substitute for the word ‘boy’ though. Put that genius brain of yours to some use.”

“You’ve got company incoming Jon, I hope you’re not too green to handle them.” He winked at Jon.

Jon turned his head and saw the two girls they had rescued from the pirate ship approach. It was not the first time they had sought out his company. Jon was the only one who was fluent in High Valyrian. He let them fall in beside him and listened to their tales of their former life in Essos. He knew he would be subjected to more teasing from his friends tonight.

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Arriving at the settlement Jon took his leave from his friends. “I need to make some visits. I will see you later today.”
He hurried to the place where he his foster grandmother still lived. As always, she was very glad to see him. After a lengthy greeting, Jon sat down and told her a censured version of his journey to Essos. He dwelt some time on his visit to Princess Daenerys. The old woman was visibly touched and often interrupted him to ask after a description of a dress or how she wore her hair. Jon smiled and tried to do his utmost to remember things he hadn’t actually paid that much attention to. He could however tell her of her beautiful eyes and kind smile. He was taken aback by her next question. “Does the Princess have any suitors? I gather from your tale that she is not yet betrothed? She is of a marriageable age, Jon. It is your responsibility to see her well settled. Remember, you are the head of the family.”

“She is not yet betrothed grandma. We both decided to give her the opportunity to adapt herself to living in Westeros first. I would not like to betroth her to a man she has never seen. I will not give her away to someone she hates. She should at least get along with her future husband. Anyway I am still wrapping my head around the fact that I can order my father’s sister whom she has to marry.” Jon tried to keep his tone neutral although he felt very uneasy for some reason. “So are you not considering yourself, my dear boy?” Her tone was curious but Jon could hear the underlying feeling of disappointment.

“Not you too, Grandma. I admit her husband will be a lucky man. However she is family and I will not force her to marry her nephew. What’s more, my advisers have been busy presenting several potential brides for me and husbands for her.” He took her hand, desperate to make her understand this difficult choice. “If political marriages can gain us the necessary support to avoid bloodshed, do you see me living happily ever after with a wife of my own choice knowing full well that as a result of my selfishness thousands died?”

“You are not Prince Rhaegar, Jon. He was already married. You do not have a Mad King for a father. This is a very different situation. The little I have heard of your plans, you have already gained substantial support. Promise me not to agree to a betrothal lightly. Allow yourself the same courtesy as you do the Princess. You should at least get along with your future wife. And that is the last I will say on this matter. I trust you to do the right thing.” His grandmother squeezed his hand and then released it. She took the little box that stood beside her on a small table. Jon was relieved the subject was dropped. He knew the box contained letters from his former wet nurse. He took the box from her and searched for the most recent letters. He put them in the correct order and started to read out loud. It was their usual routine. His grandmother’s eyesight was not getting better with age and the effort of reading sometimes gave her a headache. Jon didn’t mind performing this small service for her. He was always glad to hear how Wylla was doing. He had fond memories of his nurse. She had returned to Dorne when Jon left for Greywater Watch shortly before his fifth nameday. This way they still kept in touch. She often addressed a small part of the letter to him and Jon would dictate an answer to be included in his grandmother’s responses. Some time later Jon left his foster grandmother with the promise to visit again the next day.

It was almost noon when Jon and Ghost arrived at the cave where his dragons were slumbering. Ser Oswell had guard duty and kept a respectful distance knowing full well that nobody could protect Jon better than the combination of a direwolf and two dragons.

Rhaegal was the first to lift his head. He watched his human approach. Jon realised for the first time how large the dragons had grown. He hadn’t noticed this when he had looked through Rhaegal’s eyes. And later he had only seen them high up in the sky, their shape obscured by the clouds.

He gently stroked the scales on Rhaegal’s left cheek. The dragon purred and closed his eyes. Viserion’s head nudged Jon’s shoulder. Jon smiled “Glad to see you too Viserion.” He petted the
Jon enjoyed the peace and quiet for a bit. Then he closed his eyes and warged into Rhaegal. That was the easiest way to share his feelings about the battle in images and feelings, and prevent misunderstandings. Rhaegal could feel how grateful he was for their help. How proud he was that they could fly so high and fast, how he relished how strong and powerful they had become. Slowly he opened his mind further and let Rhaegal feel how he would have liked a bit more reticence before attacking and that Jon preferred to avoid human casualties if possible, even if the men were evil. The green dragon grumbled a bit at that. Jon shifted his position. He petted his dragon and tried a different tactic. He showed Rhaegal how he himself had made mistakes and learned from them. He also reassured him they all would get better at understanding each other’s intentions every time they worked as a team. The next time they would already be smarter. He felt the dragon struggle with the concept of showing enemies mercy, but Jon sensed him trying to consider his point of view. He was confident Rhaegal would think on it some more and share his feelings with Viserion. Jon planned to revisit the subject with them at least one more time before they left the Driftmark. He would then try to convince them not to attack until he gave explicit permission. He was hopeful they would be willing to adhere to that as long as Jon’s own life was not in acute danger. If that was the case, he knew there would be no stopping them, his years with Ghost had taught him that much.

Some time later he started to talk quietly. It looked like he was talking to himself but he sensed that Rhaegal was listening with his eyes closed. Viserion on the other hand could be heard snoring lightly.

“We’re going to be travelling together soon. First we will be marching over land. I want you to stay high up in the sky, out of sight and only come down when you can do so in deserted areas where no humans are around. After dark when we have set up camp, find a discreet place in the woods. I’ll do my best to come and stay the night with you. Later on, I’ll travel by boat again but this time the ship will stay close to the coast lines. You can follow me and sleep on the shores. I promise to connect with you each night right after dark. You don’t have to remember all that. Don’t worry. We’ll take it one day at a time. For now, let’s just enjoy each other’s company.”

Jon leaned his head against Rhaegal’s flank, closed his eyes and dozed for a bit.

***

Sometime later Ser Oswell, Jon and Ghost walked back to the small settlement.

“And how was your first battle experience?” Ser Oswell asked.

“Haven’t you heard it all ad nauseam from Ser Gerold and Ser Arthur? Jon evaded. “I do not know how I feel about it.”

“I heard from them and from several others as well.” Ser Oswell answered. “Tell me anyway.”

“Guilty about how it started. Proud at how well I could fend off experienced fighters, very troubled about Ser Arthur getting wounded and a crewman loosing his life. I am glad to have some battle experience under my belt, not really sorry for the men I killed. I feel ashamed for the fear I felt when they charged at me. I’d say I’m conflicted.” Jon looked at Ser Oswell watching his reaction to his words.

“I heard you handled yourself well. You were brave. Battles can have unexpected outcomes. You
are not responsible for everything that happens in this world my Prince. But sometimes you act like it. I could accuse you of being imperious if I didn’t know any better.”

Seeing his Prince had nothing further to say he continued. “Anyway, I look forward to the new training exercises. I hear we are going to battle in formation. It will not be boring, that I can tell you.”

“Thanks Ser Oswell.” Jon said quietly a bit later when the settlement came into view.

“You’re welcome my Prince.”

Jon saw Gendry in front of the workshop of the local blacksmith. “Hey Gendry, couldn’t stay away from the forge?”

“I can’t help it. I miss the work I did with Tobho Mott.” Gendry inspected some tools. The first time he had arrived at the Driftmark with Davos, he had immediately befriended Jekken, the only blacksmith at this little settlement.

“Then perhaps you could help me out? I would like some items custom made. Perhaps Jekken will let you use his forge when he is finished working?”

“Gendry is welcome here anytime, My Lord”, the blacksmith was quick to oblige. He has helped me several times and even taught me a new technique that greatly improves the quality of my products. I’ll assist him if necessary.”

“Thank you Jekken. “ Jon and Gendry said simultaneously and grinned at each other.

“What would you like me to make? My hands are itching already.” Gendry seemed really eager.

“I have some drawings and measurements in my room. I’ll fetch them. I was hoping you could finish some of them before we depart.”

Jon addressed Jekken again. If you can provide Gendry with the ore as well, I will see that you are compensated accordingly.”

“I know, I’m not worried, My Lord. You’re my favourite customer.”

Jon acknowledged this remark with a smile.

“I’ll be back soon”, Gendry promised Jekken. He followed Jon inside to get the drawings.

***

Later that evening.

Jon entered the hall where dinner was being served. Somehow, he ended up sitting between the two female slaves they had saved from the pirates. He saw his friends looking at him and heard them giggle amongst themselves. He did his best to ignore them and tried not to blush at the slightest provocation. He feared he failed miserably at this last thing though.

Clea and Ornella had taken a liking to the dark haired youth.

“However do you get your hair to curl like this?” Clea asked twisting one curl around her finger while she talked to him.
Jon’s blush deepened as he gently disentangled her finger from his hair placing her hand on the table away from him. She smiled seductively at him not deterred in the least by his action.

Jon tried to laugh his embarrassment away. “I don’t know how to prevent it from curling.” He tried for a more serious topic. “I can arrange for a ship to take you back to Essos in the next few days. Only if you want to go back, that is”, he added.

Ornella and Clea responded almost simultaneously. “No!”

“We would just be enslaved again. This tattoo marks us as escaped slaves.” Ornella pointed at a small tear that was etched beneath her right eye. “We would never be able to choose our own life in Essos. We’ve talked it over and would like to start anew here. Perhaps find a job as a handmaid or learn a craft? I am good with a needle. Clea can make beautiful drawings.

“I’ll see what I can do for you. I’ll talk to Lord Velaryon or his castellan. He has contacts with everyone of importance on this island. We will find you some honest work. Nobody will bed you against your will ever again if you stay here.” Jon promised them in a confident voice.

The girls were beautiful, a bit exotic looking but had a pale skin. They would not be so out of place at the Driftmark. The population was a mix of races already. There were a lot of immigrants from Old Valyria with light hair, the original population with brown or red hair and the influx of dark haired Northerners.

“We can even try to help you find husbands. Start a family, have children.” Jon offered.

Clea giggled and whispered. “We would both love to bed you for free, just the one time, nobody needs to know. We would like to help you, teach you things, you know. We know more than just the simple penetration act.” She leaned closer to him and brushed his arm while staring seductively in his eyes.

Jon was scarlet now. He didn’t know how to react. He just sat there looking very embarrassed. Finally he responded speaking softly so nobody could overhear what they were talking about. “You do not need to lower yourselves again just because you’re grateful to me. You can forget about all that now.”

“It would be our pleasure my Lord. We really like you and it would be freely offered. We are sure we would enjoy it immensely ourselves. Or do you already have a wife, a lover somewhere?” It was Clea who asked this.

Ornella saved Jon the need to reply. “Can’t you see the boy is as innocent as a new born lamb? We would have to teach him everything.”

“Even better”, was Clea’s delighted reaction.

“Keep your voices down.” Jon didn’t know where to look. His face felt aflame. His entire body felt flushed. It certainly had a different opinion than his mind concerning this matter. He tried to find a way to extract himself from this conversation without offending the both of them. “I need to go speak with my friends. I just remembered something”, he tried.

They laughed in response and let him escape for now.

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“Well Jon”, Davos walked him to his room. He had taken pity on the boy who had had to withstand numerous teasing attacks from his friends and Kingsguards before giving up and deciding to retire for the night. “Would you be prepared to listen to some well meant advice of an old man who has some experience with women?”

“From you, I would welcome it.” Jon used the same hushed tone as Davos had. He was relieved Davos broached the subject he was in sore need of advice. Talking to Davos would help him make sense of his predicament.

“A man needs to learn how to handle women. You have lived too sheltered.” He looked pointedly in the direction of Ser Gerold who followed the both of them but stayed out of hearing range. “Perhaps you should use the opportunity to fill this gap in your education?”

“I would be taking advantage of them”, he objected.

“Not if they offered without being pressured. Not if they liked you and wanted to help you. Is this really the true reason you object?” Davos pressed him. They had stopped at a bench that stood in the corner of the training yard. Davos sat down and gestured Jon to do the same. “You can tell me anything, I won’t judge. I won’t laugh. I won’t gossip.”

“I know Davos. If there is anyone I could speak to about this, it would be you. I’m too embarrassed though.” Jon’s cheeks had turned red again.

Davos studied Jon closely. “Let me speak for you then.” “You are tempted, very tempted. You can imagine it vividly and are ashamed of yourself. You think you are wanton, you fear you are dishonouring them and you want to stay chaste until marriage. Am I close?”

“Something like that”, Jon admitted but still didn’t volunteer anything more.

Davos sighed. How to put it delicately and not scare the youth away? “Jon, I don’t think I known of a male entering his marriage vows without at least some previous experience. If you look at it in a pragmatic way, isn’t it better that at least one of the parties concerned knows what they’re doing? If you go about it the wrong way, you end up hurting the woman you bed. If that happens on your wedding night, it might alienate your wife from you and you would have to force her each time you wanted to make an heir.”

Jon looked rather alarmed at Davos now.

“Do it right however, and the marriage bed can become a place of pleasure for the both of you. Bedding your wife can be a daily occurrence providing satisfaction and comfort to the both of you. Many a political marriage can be turned into a happy one if the man is a generous lover. You could end up with a very loving and devoted wife. I’m sorry to talk so blunt about this but someone needs to tell you this.”

“Women can like it? Want it for more than the begetting of children?” Jon couldn’t image Lady Catelyn and uncle Ned coupling for the fun of it.

“Believe me they do. Couples appear all noble and formal in public, but once the doors of the bedroom are closed, all bets are off. That is, if the man is a good lover. A man can take hours worshipping a woman’s body. Do not think of the act as just lifting her skirt and putting your member inside of her for a few minutes and be done with it. You need to take your time. The best
way is to undress her completely and see to it you are completely naked as well. It will enhance the experience.”

“What if I am no good at it?” Jon was out of his depth now, his embarrassment forgotten by this new dilemma.

“Anyone can learn this if he is willing to put in the effort. That’s why I’m working my way up towards convincing you to accept the two willing teachers that offered themselves up to you an hour ago. If a man doesn’t know how to satisfy his wife, if he neglects her or if he is cruel to her, the woman can be enticed by other men. Her sexual desires can be awakened by someone who sees an opportunity and she could bear you children that are not your own. I known of a man who is proudly raising his male heir, not knowing he was sired by his rival. You wouldn’t want that.”

“You better realise that you will be married for a big part of your life. That is if you are lucky. The best way to ensure a tolerable marriage is to treat your wife with honour. The best way for a happy marriage is to treat her with respect, listen to her and gain her love. Satisfying her in bed is a very good start to ensure that. Your good looks and compassionate nature will do the rest.” Davos tried to end this awkward conversation on a lighter note.

“How would I do that and not let the entire settlement know? Even if I convinced myself that it would be alright to do this now, I would still be very embarrassed if we were discovered.” Jon was very tempted but was not entirely convinced he could face the consequences.

“Leave that to me.” Davos useful as always had a plan at the ready. “I will have to let Ser Gerold in on it as he has guard duty tonight. I’m afraid that means your other Kingsguards will learn about this very soon but I’ll convince them somehow to stop teasing you about it. However we will try to keep it from Edric, Sam and Gendry. I’m sure there will come a time you can be the one to tease them about this for a change. I’ll get the girls to your chambers discreetly, in say an hour from now? Better take a bath, my dear boy.” Davos chuckled.

“Tonight? This night, in an hour?” Jon felt really conflicted.

“Yes, before you have time to change your mind. I am not willing to repeat this discussion with you ever again. If you think you were embarrassed ….?”” Davos winked at him.

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The next morning Jon woke really late. It had been a strange, embarrassing but wonderful night. The girls had been very willing to explain and show him many things. He remembered Clea using Ornella’s body to show Jon various ways to prepare a woman before entering her.

“Always verify. Check whether she is wet enough down there”, she had explained patiently. “She should be as slick as a baby seal. If she isn’t yet, get her to relax. Find out which of the ways we showed you pleases her most. Pay attention to her body language and the sounds she makes when you touch each part of her body.”

When Jon had stated after some very sensual lessons that he knew enough and that it was sufficient, they had persuaded him that he was being unfair if he did not fully satisfy them after all they had done for him. After a bit more coaxing, Jon had complied. He then had proceeded to show them how
closely he had listened when they had described the different positions for coupling.

Clea had wanted to be mounted like a wolf. Having already come once while they were on the subject of handjobs, Jon had been able to last long enough to have her on her back as well before releasing his seed inside her.

He had panicked immediately after. “I do not want to get you with child. That’s not a good way for you to start a new life here.”

Ornella had proceeded to tell him of all the ways women could prevent getting with child. They had sworn they were not trapping him. They liked him and just wanted to teach him. Jon had studied them closely and had decided to trust them. Besides, if their information about a woman’s cycle were true, there was not much of a chance they could conceive this night anyway.

After some much needed rest, Ornella had taught him how a woman could take control of the act by being on top and riding him. He had let her have her way with him for a while but before long he had hoisted her up and used his strength to position her against the wall. He had really enjoyed doing it like that and it hadn’t taken him long to finish once more.

When both girls had left him with a small peck on his check, Jon had felt on top of the world. He was ready to admit now that Davos had been right once more. He would tease Gendry, Sam and Edric about this one day. He could well be the one who knew more about this now than the three of them combined.

The next morning he woke up with a big smile on his face. He jumped out of bed and took a very necessary bath. It would be a great day!

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“You’re late Jon. You were needed before.” Sam called out to him when he entered the room where everyone had already finished breaking their fast. Gendry and Edric were eying him suspiciously. Ser Gerold remained stoic.

“I slept really well”, Jon replied. “Where is the fire?”

“There’s a raven with the direwolf seal. We think it is from your uncle Benjen. We are all anxious to know what it contains. Hopefully the news will not affect our journey.” Sam handed him the little scroll.

Everyone kept staring at him expectantly so Jon relented and read the message before he ate. He broke the seal and read it. A big smile appeared on his face.

“Uncle Benjen is in Kingslanding. He wants to join us on our trip north. He asks to prepare provisions for three additional travellers since he will be bringing two friends with him.”

He looked over to Ser Gerold. “He suggests we meet up in the woods near Antlers, the castle of Lord Buckwell. That is between Kingslanding and Harrenhal. We were planning to travel through there anyway. The only tricky thing is the timing. He will be there in five days time. If I am correct, we would have to leave the day after tomorrow. That is one day sooner than planned.”

“Who will he bring? What if they see the dragons?” Ser Gerold remarked.
“It is uncle Benjen, Ser Gerold. Do you really think he would do something that would endanger me? But to answer your question, no he did not mention names. That could mean they are either just unknown men travelling north, to the Wall perhaps, or they are very important people and he doesn’t want this to get out should the message be intercepted.” Jon assumed.

“Enjoy your breakfast first. I’ll gather everyone so we can coordinate our efforts to get everything prepared to leave at first light the day after tomorrow.” Ser Gerold signalled Sandor to take over guard duty and left to alert Davos and Ser Arthur.

“I wonder who he is bringing along.” Sam mused. “Did you know what he was doing in Kingslanding Jon?”

“He mentioned something about Prince Oberyn in a previous letter but didn’t go into detail. I know the Prince is prone to travel a lot but I cannot think of a good reason why he would journey across the Riverlands and sail to the Stony shore in our company. It must be someone else. We’ll just have to be patient.” Jon answered.

Jon took a plate and finally sat down to eat. He was really hungry.

“Jon, do you mind if we get some air before another boring meeting starts?” Gendry asked.

“Of course not, go and enjoy the sun while you can. I could do with some peace and quiet.”

Gendry and Edric left immediately. Sam hesitated and decided to stay with Jon for now.

Jon turned to him with a solemn smile. “You can join them outside you know. It will probably be a long boring meeting, they are right about that. “

“Jon”, Sam hesitated. “Not to pry or judge you know, but did you, you know, with those girls.” Sam couldn’t look Jon in the eye his face was very red.

Jon looked down, the smile disappeared from his face and he just nodded. Then he raised his head once more to look at Sam. “Don’t tell the others yet please? Let me decide when or what to tell. It was a one time only thing anyway, a kind of learning experience. Let’s just say I graduated.” A small smile appeared once more.

An awkward silence ensued. Then Sam nodded solemnly. “I won’t say a word but know they suspect. I cannot guarantee they won’t pester you about it.”

“That’s fine Sam. I’ll handle their jibes one at a time.” Jon’s smile grew wider.

“You know”, Sam said awkwardly while he stood up. “I think I will join them outside for a moment. I’ll see you in a bit?”

“Yes Sam and thanks. You’re a good friend.”

“You’re welcome Jon. I could say the same about you.”

Jon returned his attention to his plate and smiled to nobody in particular. It was a glorious morning after all.

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'It seems Gendry was right once more. It really is a boring meeting. Why do I have to concern myself with all the logistics? Do I really have to help them calculate how many supplies to bring along? What can be procured along the way and so on? The only interesting part is the road we’re going to take.’

Jon’s mind wandered off for a bit. He knew Ghost was somewhere outside. He concentrated and ‘soon he was outside near the caves. The dragons felt his presence and lifted their lazy heads looking curiously at Ghost.

“Jon! Jon! Pay attention. Where were you?” Davos reprimanded him. This meeting is to plan your journey. The least you can do is pretend to be interested.”

“Sorry Davos”, Jon excused himself a sheepish expression on his face. “I guess I didn’t get enough sleep last night.” He looked at Davos keeping his face level to hide his little victory. He had made Davos blush.

***

The last day before they were set to leave, Jon had spoken to Ser Gerold about his nomination of Sandor Clegane to his Kingsguard. When Ser Gerold had agreed stating the man had earned his knighthood twice over, Jon had needed all his powers of persuasion to get Ser Gerold to set aside the steep traditions he had lived by all this life and make this exception.

That evening, Jon made a small speech before dinner. He officially named Sandor Clegane a member of his Kingsguard and handed the four of them their new badges. Gendry had outdone himself. The badges depicted two crossed swords engulfed in flames. He promised to replace them later with a version that had two dragons at each side facing the swords, but for now these would do.

When he pinned the badge on Sandor, he whispered to the man that if he ever changed his mind, he just had to say the word and Ser Gerold would knight him on the spot. Sandor had just swallowed and accepted the badge with moist eyes.

***

The first part of their journey had gone smoothly. A short boat trip brought them from the Driftmark to the Crownlands. They had come ashore well north of Kingslanding and had reached the woods near Antlers on schedule.

Soon the tents were put up and they all enjoyed a simple meal. It seemed they were the first to arrive. Now they just needed to wait for uncle Benjen and his mystery guests. His friends were talking about nothing else. The wildest ideas were thrown into their little group.

Jon had no patience to dwell on that now. He wanted to go see to his dragons. He had felt them land some time ago. He asked Ser Oswell to keep an eye on him as he sat down and warged into Ghost. They were off in a flash, it didn’t take them long to find a large rock with the dragons beside it. He ordered Ghost back to the camp and left his warg mode.

“Ghost has found the dragons. It’s not that far from here. I will go to them and sleep there. Will you let Ser Gerold know we will be leaving? We can set off as soon as you are back. Ghost will have returned by then and can lead us there. I will take Blackfyre with me as well.
A bit later Ser Oswell returned and was accompanied by Ser Arthur. “We have brought our tent and will sleep out there with you”, the latter explained. “Ser Gerold’s orders.”

“Let’s go then, I am eager to see with my own eyes how they are doing. They have flown for the better part of two days. I want to know if they had sufficient energy left to find food and have everything they need.” They left their horses behind and followed Ghost to where the dragons were resting. Jon had tried to let the dragons do their own thing. It was part of the reason for this journey. They needed to learn to fend for themselves and behave according to some ground rules he had set up for them. He had forced himself not to check up on them and had used this time to enjoy the company of Sam, Edric and Gendry. It was nice discovering new lands with the boys.

‘Hello guys’, Jon greeted his dragons, glad to see them lying comfortably sheltered by the large carved out rock which provided shelter from the winds. Rhaegal puffed some smoke at him. Jon petted the dragons for some time enjoying his connection to the both of them. When the three of them were done exchanging feelings and felt at ease with each other once more, he installed himself, as he often did, with his back to Rhaegal’s flank. He also rested his head against the dragon’s warm scales. Ghost installed himself a bit further away and fell asleep almost instantly.

‘And how was your day?’ He entered Rhaegal’s mind and together they remembered the last few days. The dragons hadn’t been in the air the entire time. Since they could fly much faster as the tiny humans moved on their beasts, the dragons were way ahead of them and had often doubled back, playing in the air. When the sun was at its highest peak they had found a deserted beach with a cave and had slumbered for a bit. There was plenty of game to be had and both of them had eaten well. Jon was reassured. They had been careful. All would be well. He left Rhaegal’s mind and sent his approval to the both of them. Then he nestled himself still closer to Rhaegal. The dragon curled his body around him and Jon felt warm and loved. He relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

***

The next morning he woke up feeling cold. Apparently Rhaegal and Viserion had just taken off. He could see them fly higher and higher until they disappeared behind the clouds. He saw Ghost and Ser Arthur watching him. Both sat before the little tent. As soon as Ser Arthur noticed Jon get up, he dipped his head inside of the tent to wake Ser Oswell.

“Get ready. We move out immediately.” Turning to Jon he said, “Time to join the others and check if your uncle has arrived.”

When they entered the encampment everyone was huddled around the fires. It was still moist and chilly out in the woods this early in the morning. The cloud covered sky didn’t allow the sun to help things much. Jon joined them and accepted a plate filled with food that Sam handed him.

“No sign of uncle Benjen yet?” he asked Ser Gerold when he had almost finished eating. The knight was the only one left around the fire. The others had long finished their meal and were busy with chores around the encampment.

“Nothing yet. Perhaps you can send Ghost on a scouting mission?”

“I will finish my plate first, and then I will send him off. As soon as we’re done here we can organize a small fighting competition. At the very least the activity will keep us warm.”
“I would prefer you to repeat that last exercise once more, the one where you fight back to back with Edric while four men are coming at you simultaneously. Edric is making progress, don’t you think so?” Ser Gerold asked him.

“I’ve told him as much yesterday.” Jon smiled. “Even Gendry is making progress if you keep in mind he had hardly wielded a sword before he came to the Driftmark. He still prefers his hammer though.”

“Sam however …” Ser Gerold was looking for the right words.

“He doesn’t need to become a good fighter. Just try to teach him the basic principles to defend himself. I intend to send him to the citadel to become a Maester if he agrees and if I can clear it with his Lord father.” Jon really wanted Sam to stay with him.

“Has he given up his idea of joining the Night’s Watch then?” Ser Gerold asked.

“He has not admitted it to me yet, but I can see he is tempted. I’m trying to give him space.” An idea struck him. “Perhaps there is a better tactic. Perhaps I just need to set Davos loose on him. If anyone can persuade someone to do something, it is him.”

“Speaking from personal experience, my Prince?” Ser Gerold couldn’t keep it in. “Two girls simultaneously Jon?”

Jon turned crimson. “Hmm I think it is time I set Ghost on his way”, he stammered. He got up and left Ser Gerold ignoring the big smirk on the knight’s face.

***

Ghost had not immediately known which direction to take. Jon was starting to get worried. He saw Davos and Sandor approach.

“Something wrong boy?” Clegane asked

“You know I don’t like to be called boy.” Jon retorted.

“Well do not stand around looking like a little lost boy then, my Prince.” Sandor grinned.

“What’s wrong Jon?” Davos interrupted their banter.

“I’m just worried about my uncle. He should have been here by now. I told Ghost to seek him out but he seems at a loss in which direction to start.” Jon was eager for some advice.

“Simple as fuck”, was Clegane’s answer. “Send him in the direction of that stinking city, south slightly east.”

Jon looked at Ghost and the direwolf sprinted away.

“Thanks Sandor.”

“Wait until they are found. Enough time for thanks then.” Sandor looked toward the direction Ghost had taken. “Do you mind if I do some scouting myself?”
“Best clear it with Ser Gerold. It is fine by me.” Jon said seeing Sandor depart.

“They will be all right Jon. Your uncle can handle himself.” Davos tried to reassure him.

“We do not know whom he is bringing along. It could be two prisoners for the Wall that are sabotaging him as much as they can. He is never late if he can help it.” Jon argued.

“It doesn’t do you any good to mope about it. Get that training sword of yours and let us admire your fighting prowess once more. I never tire seeing it.” Davos tried a distracting tactic.

“Davos, if you have the time, can you talk to Sam sometime?” Jon also used the tactic of focussing on other things to forget his current worries for a time.

“You mean talk him out of joining the Watch?” Leave it to Davos to understand him with barely any information.

“Aye?” Jon looked hopefully at Davos. “Do you not think he would be an excellent Maester? He absorbs knowledge as no one I have ever known. I know we would have to convince his father. I think we can appease the man if we send him a written statement in which Sam relinquishes all rights to Horn Hill for himself and every possible issue he might have.

“I’ll see what I can do”, he promised. Come on, let’s get moving. I’m sure they are already waiting for you to start the sparring sessions.

***

It was almost dark before Ghost ran back into the camp. Jon got up straight away and met Ghost halfway. Ser Arthur cursed and ran after them. Ghost and Jon had set of in the direction the direwolf came from. “Jon, wait, I’m coming with you.” Ser Arthur called after him.

Jon stopped sprinting and looked back. Ser Arthur reached him catching his breath. “Why don’t you do your warg thing. If Ghost has found him before, he can find him again and a lot faster than the two of us. Once you know they are all right we can go meet them without breaking our necks. If they are in trouble, we will know how to approach them.” It was sound advice.

Jon sat down and closed his eyes. Soon he was running faster than he ever had. Trees flashed by, frightened animals hurried off clearing his path and suddenly there was uncle Benjen. Jon felt Ghost’s exhilaration as he jumped uncle Benjen and greeted him by licking his face. Uncle Benjen ordered him to stop. Ghost complied and looked for possible threats. There were three other humans but they seemed harmless now they had sheathed their swords. Jon focussed Ghost’s eyes and looked them over. Closest to him stood a man in his fifties dressed as a knight, next to him a young man perhaps the same age as Jon himself, richly dressed but looking haggard, and … he looked once more, was that a woman? It seemed so. Everyone looked all right. Uncle Benjen patted him and looked Ghost in the eyes. He felt the reassurance through Ghost’s mind. He released his connection to Ghost.

Ser Arthur saw Jon come out of his trance. “And?”

“They seem all right. I do not know what the delay was about. He is accompanied by three travellers though.”

“Describe them to me. I know a lot of people in Kingslanding”, Ser Arthur ordered.
“Well, there is a woman amongst them. She is unusually tall, muscular and dressed as a knight. I first mistook her for a man.”

“Did you notice a sigil on her armour?” Ser Arthur asked.

“I didn’t look.” Jon confessed feeling dumb now.

“Never mind, I do not think many women match that description. That could be the Lady Brienne of Tarth. Remember her from Prince Oberyn’s report? She was a sworn shield of Prince Renly.”

“Of course, that could be her!”

“Who else did you see?”

“An older man, perhaps in his fifties, clearly a knight. No sigils that I noticed immediately.”

“Mmmmmh could be anyone by that description but I know of only one knight in Kingslanding who would want to come look for you.”

“Ser Barristan the Bold?”

“Let’s hope so. Who else?”

“A young knight, perhaps my age? He did not look well. He seemed unkempt although his clothes looked expensive. Oh, I saw a sigil on him: three golden roses on a field of green, Tyrell?”

“Loras! Then the scheme worked, although this is much sooner as expected. I hope Eddard Stark can still take credit. This is good news Jon. Perhaps the delay had something to do with him?”

“Let’s go meet them.” Jon led the way taking large steps.

‘At least I do not have to run this time.’ Ser Arthur hurried after his charge, looking forward to seeing Ser Barristan again. It had been a very long time.

***

A bit earlier in the woods.

They had stopped to water their horses and were about to continue their journey. Ser Barristan took the reigns of his horse and led it back toward the others. Suddenly his horse spooked. Ser Barristan immediately went for his sword. He saw Loras Tyrell and Lady Brienne startle as well. A large white animal jumped Benjen Stark.

“Don’t hurt it!” he heard Stark call out. “It’s okay. This is a dear friend of mine.”

Three pair of unbelieving eyes saw some kind of giant white animal playfully slobber all over Stark. “Down Ghost!” he ordered and to their amazement the big creature complied but still nudged Stark’s flank seeking contact.

“Is this Jon’s pet?” Ser Barristan asked quietly.

Benjen Stark simply nodded. He turned towards the others. “Don’t be afraid. This is a direwolf I
grant you, but one that has been raised by a friend of mine from a tender age. As long as you don’t hurt anyone he considers part of his pack, he won’t hurt you. Threaten me for example and your throats will be ripped out before you can even start to think about defending yourselves.”

Loras looked at the direwolf with curiosity. Ser Barristan was glad to see this. The boy had seemed to spiral deeper into a depression as the time went on.

“Can I pet him?” Loras looked at Benjen Stark.

“Better wait till his master arrives. He obeyed me this time but I can’t guarantee he will do so again.” Stark warned. “Can you guide us to Jon, Ghost?”

The direwolf seemed to consider this but then disappeared as fast as he had appeared.

“He’s probably going to bring Jon to us.” Benjen answered the unspoken question.

Ser Barristan stepped closer to Benjen. “We stay here and wait?”

“Let’s try and meet them halfway.” Benjen Stark turned his head and called out to all three. “Come along! We’ve almost caught up with the others.” He started off in the direction the direwolf had come from.

The next time the animal came back into sight. Ser Barristan hardly looked at it. His eyes were fixed on his two companions. Never mind that his eyes grew moist at the sight of Ser Arthur, he hadn’t seen his friend for more than sixteen years, his curiosity got the better of him and he shifted his attention to the boy next to his former friend.

‘Rhaegar’s son, he truly is Rhaegar’s son.’ Barristan was sure. The dark curls could mislead many but Barristan had been very close to Rhaegar. Besides it was easier if you already knew what you were looking for. He recognised the delicate cheekbones, the firm chin but also the way the Prince held himself. Ser Barristan couldn’t wait to get to know him and find more similarities.

He saw Stark dismount and envelop the boy in a warm hug. The Prince seemed an eager participant. “I’m glad your safe uncle. I was starting to get worried.” Ser Barristan heard him say.

With effort he tore his eyes away from the boy and dismounted as well so he could greet them properly. Ser Arthur didn’t hesitate and made the first move. Ser Barristan received a brief hug and a pat on his back.

Ser Barristan looked his erstwhile brother in the eyes. “Sixteen years an not so much as a secret message”, he scolded.

“My sworn vow took precedence. You would have done the same to keep him safe.” Ser Barristan saw firm conviction in Ser Arthur’s eyes.

He nodded and turned his attention back on Benjen Stark and his nephew. They had finished greeting each other. The direwolf sat beside them keeping a close eye on his pack.

Benjen Stark did the honours. “Let me introduce you to Jon Celtigar and his sworn sword Ser Arthur. I told you we will join his entourage since we share the same destination. It is safer to travel across these lands in larger company.

“Jon, Ser Arthur, please meet Lord Loras Tyrell, son of Mace Tyrell who is lord Paramount of the Reach and Lord of Highgarden. His father is currently a member of the small council. Lord Tyrell will visit the Starks at Winterfell and will join you for the first part of your journey.” He then turned to the large woman. “This is the Lady Brienne, daughter of Lord Selwyn Tarth, Lord of Evenhall on the Isle of Tarth.”
“Let me introduce you to Ser Barristan Selmy, Jon.” Ser Arthur jumped in, wanting to be the one to introduce his former brother to his King.

Everyone exchanged greetings and the party continued on foot towards the small encampment. Ser Barristan couldn’t tear his eyes from Rhaegar’s son until he noticed Loras and Brienne whisper to each other from the corner of his eye. He saw them look at him and arranged it so he could walk beside them.

“Is that Ser Arthur, The Sword of the Morning?” Lady Brienne asked with reverence in her voice.

“Yes it is. Remember the vow you gave Benjen Stark.” He reminded her in a stern voice.

“You knew all the time he was alive? You knew we would meet them?” The young Tyrell’s behaviour displayed an equal amount of hero worship.

“No to the first and yes to your second question”, he frowned. “But I am serious, either you keep to your vows or you will become our hostages.”

“Do not question my honour!” Lady Brienne bristled.

“As if I would want to harm the Sword of the Morning!” Loras exclaimed. “Hells I’ll be begging him for a sparring session until he complies.” He looked at Ser Arthur a calculating expression in his eyes. “Does that mean that Ser Gerold Hightower and Ser Oswell Whent survived as well? I grew up on stories of them.”

“Just stick to your vows.” Ser Barristan stressed once more, his eyes carefully watching the Prince who walked a few paces before him. His frown was even more pronounced now.

In the meantime, Jon after checking his uncle was in good health immediately questioned him about the reason for the delay. Apparently King Robert had received a raven from Winterfell and had been convinced to release Loras Tyrell in custody of the Starks. Since Benjen was there, the King had asked him to escort Loras personally instead of waiting for Lord Stark to send someone to pick him up. King Robert was glad to get rid of the young Tyrell and be done with this potentially disastrous business. Benjen Stark had set out almost two days later as originally planned.

“You were already travelling. I couldn’t get a message to you”, he apologised.

“You brought Loras Tyrell and someone from Tarth? What the hells uncle, the dragons are with us!” Jon whispered fiercely.

“I didn’t have a choice Jon. I was ordered by the King. Initially I was just bringing Ser Barristan and his squire and then suddenly all of my planning was shot to hell. The squire switched mentors preferring to stay at court and the King ordered me to take these two along.”

“What will we do now?” Jon had asked.

“I made them vow on their honour not to reveal anything they would discover during this trip. I threatened to make them hostages in the North instead of guests if they broke their oath. They promised solemnly not to send ravens or messages without our supervision. What else could I do?” Benjen whispered back.

“Take away their weapons. Guard them until they’re far enough north.” Jon answered. “I will discuss this with Ser Gerold.”
‘I’m sorry Jon. I really saw no other way. If you want, we can travel ahead. I need to stop at Riverrun anyway. I’ll be sorry to miss your company though. It has been too long.”

“Let’s talk with Ser Gerold and see how we can keep them separated from the dragons.” Jon relented.

Wanting a break from this awkward situation he turned his head to look behind him and smiled at Ser Barristan. The knight took that as an invitation and quickened his step so he could join the Prince and his uncle. Benjen Stark acknowledged his presence with a short nod.

“Ser Barristan, it is an honour to meet you Ser. I’ve heard many stories about you from my three guards. I have been looking forward to meet you.” Jon said respectfully.

Barristan was catapulted back into time. That voice! If he closed his eyes he could almost imagine he was walking next to his dear departed friend Prince Rhaegar. He made an effort to formulate a response before his emotions got the better of him.

“It is an honour to meet you as well My Prince”, he said quietly. “I’m sorry I didn’t know of your existence. I’m ever so grateful that you have been kept safe all these years. It seems my brothers did right by you. “

“They certainly did. I owe them a lot. They have been loyal mentors, protectors and friends. I’m sorry you were stuck in Kingslanding all these years. I was told you were very close to my father? Perhaps we can talk about him in private sometime during this journey? There are also a few things I would like to show you.”

“I’ll be happy to tell you all I remember of your father. He was a very dear friend of mine. Perhaps you will tell me of your youth as well?” Ser Barristan tried to capitalise on this welcoming mood of his Prince.

“We’ll find the time”, Jon promised. Then he spoke up so his words were for both men. “Uncle Benjen, we’re almost there. The encampment will be visible when we take a right turn here.”

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Brienne watched with amazement how Ser Barristan got a warm welcome from Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold. Loras Tyrell had guessed right. The three famous knights were alive and right in front of her. She also saw an older man greet Benjen Stark warmly. The man frowned however when he looked at her and Loras Tyrell. Jon Celtigar had just left them without a word, taking his wolf with him. Brienne had watched them disappear inside a tent.

Loras Tyrell and Lady Brienne waited awkwardly until someone would introduce them. It was Jon Celtigar who reappeared and joined them, bringing three other youths along.

My Lord Tyrell, my Lady Brienne, may I present to you my friends? Lord Tyrell, I think you already know Samwell Tarly, son of Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill? “ Loras Tyrell and Sam Tarly stumbled an uncomfortable greeting. Introductions continued and an uneasy conversation ensued.

Jon Celtigar kept his eyes on her the entire time and as soon as there was a small pause in the
conversation he sent his friends away with the request to show Loras Tyrell the encampment. Brienne decided not to react and waited for his next move.

“Lady Brienne”, Jon tried to break the ice, “Am I right that you are a trained warrior?”

“I was a sworn sword to Renly Baratheon”, she answered her face sombre.


“After Lord Baratheon’s arrest, people at court either ignored or insulted me. It was rather unpleasant. When Loras Tyrell was released in custody of the Warden of the North, I offered to accompany him. I felt somewhat responsible since they were arrested on my watch not to mention I was glad to leave the city behind me.”

“What are your plans?” Jon asked.

“See Loras Tyrell safe to Winterfell. After that, I do not know yet. A lot will depend of what will happen to Renly Baratheon.”

“Did Benjen Stark speak to you about our group?”

“He made us vow not to tell anyone of what we might see or hear. We swore on our honour, several times I might say.” Lady Brienne was getting tired of justifying herself.

“I suppose that is what you are referring to? I hope you will not doubt my honour as well! I solemnly swear that I will not tell anyone that the three most famous Kingsguards whose disappearance is one of the most speculated about mysteries in the realm, are travelling across Westeros for some unknown reason.” She sneered at him.

“Nor anything else you see or hear”, Jon warned. “Try not to act so offended. The only reason we have been able to keep their presence in Westeros a secret has been because we take every precaution and distrust strangers who appear uninvited. If you want our trust, gain it.“

Lady Brienne immediately noticed the implication that there was still something of significance to be discovered but decided to ignore this for now. She just remarked “Why is it still a secret? The realm still worships these men.”

“Not King Robert. He would probably kill them. He still thinks of them as Targaryen loyalists”, Jon retorted. “Keep your vow, behave as promised and don’t poke around! If you do not adhere to these restrictions a guard will be assigned to you day and night.” He warned her once more.

Ser Gerold had drawn nearer to his Prince and heard the last of their conversation.

“My lady, if you would please hand over your weapons for the time being. You will get them back in pristine condition, I assure you.”

Lady Brienne looked exasperated but had no choice and complied for the time being.

Jon tried to defuse the situation and asked her about her time in Kingslanding, of her impression of the royal court and the nobles there. He explained his curiosity by telling her he had never set foot in the capital of the Seven Kingdoms.

Lady Brienne started talking, stiffly at first but encouraged by his insightful questions she slowly warmed up to the topic and to her interlocutor. She was rather elaborate when she described Ser Jaime Lannister.

“He is handsome and has incredible fighting skills but he is arrogant, a snob and I cannot respect a
vow breaker.” She ended her description in a passionate voice.

“Did you meet his brother the dwarf? I have heard it mentioned that he is quite the political mind.” Jon asked.

“I did not have the pleasure to speak to him. I only observed him from a distance, my Lord.”

Ser Gerold intervened now. According to him the discussion had served its purpose.

“My lady, if you will follow me, I will help you get settled in. I am sure you must be hungry.”

Lady Brienne followed the knight who assisted her with securing the horses in the temporary enclosure. He also showed her a tent where she could leave her belongings. Then she freshened herself up a bit and joined the others who were gathered around several fires. She gratefully accepted the food she was offered. She would keep her eyes and ears open. This already proved to be an enlightening journey.

***

Sandor, Edric, Gendry and Sam worked out a schedule to divert their guests and keep an eye on them during Jon’s visits with his dragons. The second night Jon brought Benjen Stark and Ser Barristan along with him. It was a clear night and the moon and stars provided enough light for a pleasant stroll. Jon used the opportunity to give Ser Barristan a brief summary of his life so far. Then he showed him Blackfyre.

The knight touched the blade reverently. “If only your father could see you now. He spent his life researching dragons, magic and prophecies. And here you are, not yet counting seventeen namedays and already you are in possession of a long lost Valyrian sword and dragons? I can hardly believe it.”

“Well, if you look to your right, your eyes might convince you to believe me.” Jon watched Ser Barristan closely. The man froze. Two large dragons lay twenty feet away. Ser Barristan saw the green dragon open his eyes and lift his head a bit. He felt nervous. He was being measured up by a large dragon. “Is it safe to be so close to them? Aren’t they dangerous?”

“It is the same as with Ghost I suppose. If you threaten me, or if I order them to kill you, your life is forfeit. There would be nothing you could do to defend yourself.”

Ser Barristan saw that Jon was deadly serious. The Prince had not finished his explanation. “I however am not in any danger at all. They are completely loyal to me. They think of me as their parent. I helped them hatch and I cared for them from their very first day. I would do anything to protect them. If I knew you were planning to harm them, I would not hesitate to kill you.”

“Stay here”, he ordered Ser Barristan. I’m going over there to join them and rest a bit.”

Jon went over to Rhaegal and scratched his scales below his eye. “Had a nice day?” The dragon blew some smoke. “Well mine was stressful.” He went over to Viserion who had deigned to open a lazy eye when he heard his human talk to his brother. Jon petted him as well. Viserion allowed this for a short while but then moved his head away and closed his eyes resuming his sleep. Jon settled himself into his now familiar position against Rhaegal’s flank, closed his eyes and felt his mind relax. He entered Rhaegal’s mind and they shared each other’s memories of this day.”
Benjen Stark watched the scene with rapt attention. “They have gotten so big and Jon treats them no different than if they were large cats. It is amazing isn’t it?”

Ser Barristan just nodded his head and watched Prince Aegon slumber between two large dragons. “How do you cope with all this? How do you begin to protect a youth who sleeps between dragons?”

“You should ask your three brothers that. But do not forget that before he celebrated his twelfth nameday there were no dragons and no direwolf, he was just a kind, intelligent boy and a promising swordsman. Ser Arthur really enjoyed teaching him to wield his little training sword. When the dragons appeared they were not taller than a cat. Everyone had time to grow used to them though I admit we all keep our distance.” He smiled.

Ser Barristan stayed silent his eyes still fixed on the Targaryen who appeared to be sleeping now. Benjen Stark told him softly, “Besides you do not know the half of it. Jon is not simply a Targaryen. He is a Stark as well. Apparently the magic in his blood from both bloodlines gives him a unique ability. But that is Jon’s story to tell. If you are interested, just ask him how he communicates with his pets.”

Ser Barristan considered their current predicament his eyes still on the boy amidst his dragons. “Are we going to sleep out here as well?”

“Since I see no other Kingsguard here, I assume you were given guard duty tonight.” Stark said drily. Don’t worry, I packed accordingly and will keep you company”

Ser Barristan and Stark had set up the primitive tent and were now seated around the fire. Barristan saw Ghost lying next to Stark. The wolf studied him as if trying to determine whether he was friend or enemy. Barristan offered him a hesitant smile and addressed Benjen Stark. “Is there any use to our presence here? His dragons and direwolf can kill anyone in an instant should they have nefarious intentions. He doesn’t seem to need our protection.”

“I think you mistake the role Ser Gerold, Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell have assumed all these years. You and I have accompanied Jon here just to know where he is and to guide him in his actions. In Kingslanding King Robert has a small council, a Maester and every adviser he needs. For Baratheon his White Cloaks are just guards to the royal family, nothing more, nothing less. Do not mistake my meaning, it is a vital and honourable task.” He quickly added that last bit feeling Ser Barristan stir.

“Your three erstwhile brothers are the best guards Jon could have had, but they are more than that. They are his mentors. They are a vital part of his small council. He considers them friends. For a long time when he was younger they acted as substitute parents to him. My brother, Lord Reed and I for the most part tried very hard to be there for him when he grew up, but in the end the only three who kept him company consistently throughout these years were them.” Benjen Stark explained as best as he could.

Barristan’s eyes hadn’t wavered from the boy during Benjen Stark’s discourse. “Now I am even more envious. The last sixteen years were frustrating as hell already, seeing this however …”, his voice trailed off.

“Well, it wasn’t always as idyllic as this?” Benjen smiled. “These last few years Jon has butted heads with them several times. And I am not even speaking of all the times we were worried sick about one thing or another. But I cannot lie. It has been a most rewarding sixteen years. If ever a boy showed the potential to become a benevolent and competent ruler, it is him. And I do not say that just
because he is my blood.”

“He named his dragon Rhaegal?” Barristan asked.

“You should ask Jon how that came about.” Stark replied, once more raising Barristan’s curiosity. Viserion is the name of the other one. Did Jon tell you how he met Princess Daenerys?”

Barristan shook his head. Now he really couldn’t wait to have a lengthy conversation with his Prince. “Will he stay out here like that all night?”

“I don’t know. Ser Gerold informed me that most times he wakes up after a bit and returns to the camp to avoid causing too much suspicion. Only his closest entourage know the dragons are his. Others may suspect there are dragons. Some of the smallfolk at the Driftmark surely suspect as well but you will quickly notice Jon has a way with people. I do not think there is a single one here or at the Driftmark for that matter that would willingly harm the boy.”

“Just like Rhaegar.” Barristan remarked in a nostalgic mood. “You probably do not agree but I’ve lived with Rhaegar. He was loved by the smallfolk. He had a way with people as well. He was intelligent but kind.”

“Don’t tell me”, Stark muttered, “Tell Jon.”

“As soon as I have the chance, trust me.”

Both men settled back, a relaxed atmosphere had developed between them. Their mutual believe in Jon cemented their newly formed bond. Two pair of eyes watched over the Prince who should be King.

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The third day after Benjen Stark had joined Jon’s travelling party he finally found an opportune moment to do some very necessary catching up with his nephew. Due to circumstances they had stopped and put up camp rather early that day. One of the carts had broken down and the necessary repairs would take some time. Gendry had volunteered his skills to fix the axle and had commandeered a few men.

Benjen and Jon wandered off, Ghost trailing behind them and found a secluded spot where they could sit and talk. Sandor and Ser Oswell followed having guard duty. At Jon’s request the latter took up strategic positions well in sight but not close enough to overhear his conversation if they talked quietly. They would also keep other wanderers at bay. Ghost clearly bored went of to hunt some game.

Benjen looked his nephew over from head to toe. “I know I always say this but you have really grown this time Jon. It seems I left a boy the last time and came back to find a man instead.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Jon gently nudged his uncle’s shoulder. “You look older as well”, he teased.

His uncle grinned. “Come let’s sit down. That tree over there is big enough to support both our backs. My aging bones are getting lazy.”
They installed themselves and enjoyed the sounds of the woods. Leaves rustled in the winds, birds chirped and they also heard the occasional screech probably due to Ghost scaring some unsuspecting animals.

Benjen was the first to break their contemplation.
“The dragons seem to be doing great. You can control them easily? It doesn’t take its toll on you?”

“Always the worried parent”, Jon said affectionately. “But to answer your question, it is easy. It seems so natural. When I go to them at night, their physical presence clears my mind. I feel safe, relaxed. It is difficult to explain what I experience exactly. It is as if our minds complete each other and we can only be totally at ease when we are together. Try to imagine something like that but more. It is intense, fulfilling. I can not put it into words any better. I’m sorry.”

“It is okay. I get the gist of it. So, no downsides?” Benjen felt Jon was telling only one side of it.

“It doesn’t take a toll physically. I have no headaches or anything. It is the responsibility of it all you know. I am the only one who can wield the two most dangerous weapons in the realm. If I start to think about the possible consequences of my decisions, my mistakes, I start to doubt everything.”

He lowered his voice even more. “They have gotten so powerful uncle, they are so dangerous. You have no idea what they are capable of. I felt their anger when they attacked the pirate ship. It felt as if my entire body was on fire.”

“Ser Arthur filled me in. He said the dragons acted on your feelings, not your orders. He said it was a valuable lesson and will help you in future.” Benjen tried to ease the guilt still bothering the boy.

“Did he tell you about Yara Greyjoy as well?

“He told me you interrogated her then let her go. Was it wise to put yourself forward like that?”

“Uncle Benjen please, this journey is about me becoming a man, why do you persist to treat me as a child? I have commanded a crew, made decisions. I am learning to live with the consequences of my actions. Not all of it has been easy. But isn’t that the point?”

Jon leaned his head against the tree and looked up at the sky. Benjen saw his nephew relax before his eyes and waited for the boy to come back to him. He sensed Jon would continue once he was ready.

Jon broke the soothing connection to his dragons and focused his mind back on the discussion at hand.
“What I meant to ask before about Yara Greyjoy was: did Ser Arthur tell you that she claims she has turned away from the ‘Old Ways’ of raiding, stealing and killing and wants her people to make a living by trading and farming? She told us she has gathered a following and would like to depose her father. I cannot help but think she could play a substantial role in our solution for the Iron Islands. Should we decide to help her overthrow her father, we could potentially gain two things. We could install a ruler over the Iron Islands who would owe us and she would help us diminish the threat these raiders represent to our shores.”

“He told me she was disrespectful and left without a thank you or a formal goodbye and jumped on the first ship she could find. I don’t know Jon. I do not trust the Ironborn.”
He brought up a different topic his tone full of rebuke once more.
“Ser Arthur also described to me how you jumped straight into the fray when the pirates attacked and how he got wounded.” At Jon’s eye roll he added. “Grown men can get a rebuke as well nephew. It
doesn’t mean I think of you as a child all the time. I just worry about your safety. We’ve flown under the radar until now but if you continue to act as you have done these last few weeks…”

“And you bringing a Tyrell and a lady knight helps matters?” Jon interrupted him.

Benjen sighed. “I get your point. Let’s change the subject for now shall we. I want to enjoy your company for the last few days we can be together.”

“You’re still planning to visit Riverrun?” Jon was glad his uncle had changed the subject. This was more neutral territory.

“Yes, I had several scrolls from Winterfell and one from the Blackfish, you know of him don’t you? He is the brother of the current lord Paramount of the Riverlands, a good uncle of your uncle Ned. There is trouble brewing in the Riverlands. The Freys are getting bolder. I’m glad you’re travelling by ship to the North and will not need to cross The Twins.”

“You wrote they refused to pay their taxes to the Night’s Watch.”

“Not only that, they are blatantly challenging their Lord Paramount by not answering scrolls and not paying taxes to their overlords either. What’s more, the small party the Tullys sent out to negotiate has not returned.”

“Isn’t that out of character for house Frey? I learned they always delay choosing sides in conflicts, only arriving on the scene when bloodshed is over or when they are sure they are joining the winning side. This is almost a declaration of independence, an active opening of hostilities on their part.”

“We suspect they are being manipulated. Perhaps it is a play from the Lannisters to gain more power?”

“Walder Frey would have to gain something substantial from that to risk so much. Could they have promised house Frey the position of ruling house of the Riverlands? Who would be so stupid to trust the Freys not to turn their cloak and betray them the moment things get tricky?” Jon wondered.

“As far as I can see, the Lannisters or whoever are stirring up trouble, are not running any risks. They only stand to gain. If nothing comes of it, they haven’t lost anything to begin with.”

“Has Lord Reed seen something that can help us make sense of this matter?”

“Not really, he is just one man you know. He is focusing on your safety and possible spies first. You are not travelling through the Twins. Besides his green dreams have a mind of their own as he always reminds us when we pry too much. I need to talk to the Tullys myself.”

“Will you catch up with us later then, uncle?”

“Not immediately, I will head for Winterfell next and take Loras Tyrell and Brienne of Tarth with me. I am also keen to hear my brother explain in person why he is so worried about house Bolton. After that, if you are still in the North, I will gladly come to your side again.”

“Do you mean the Boltons are still complaining about the Wildling raids south of the Wall? I thought the Night’s Watch was stopping most of them?” Jon preferred to think of the North as a stable Kingdom that his uncle Ned had absolute power over.

“My brother suspects house Bolton is sowing discord by trying to convince the Umbers and Karstarks that the Warden of the North is not handling their safety competently and at the same time...
they imply house Bolton could do better. Ned can handle that. It is their last request that gets his hackles up.” Benjen saw Jon’s eyes narrow.

“Tell me”, his nephew encouraged.

“They have all but demanded Sansa’s betrothal to Domeric Bolton. The tone of the message implies they consider it their due as second house in the North and a refusal would be considered a break of trust.”

“Surely all Northern Lords would want a marriage alliance with house Stark. I reckon uncle Ned will have received betrothal proposals from the entire realm for Sansa by now. Robb writes his sister is promising to become a real beauty and that she already is all a lady should be at her tender age.”

“It is the tone of the ‘request’ that angers your uncle. You do realise that should my brother agree to the marriage, the next Bolton heir would have Stark blood. That would strengthen the position of a possible hostile house. The Boltons have poorly disguised their ambition for centuries. It could increase their chances to rally the northern houses to their side if they found a valid reason to discredit house Stark. It could mean the end of our dominance in the North.”

“Like Robert Baratheon was crowned after the Rebellion because he had a Targaryen forefather?”

“Kind of. But Jon trouble in the North would harm your cause as well. I think it is really necessary I travel both to Riverrun and Winterfell and do so in haste. I will leave you once we reach the spot where I need to turn west to Riverrun and you will continue north to Seagard. Do I take Ser Barristan with me?”

“Why would you? I had thought to send him to Princess Daenerys. He is a Kingsguard. She is royal family. But I wanted to let Ser Gerold have the final say in this matter seeing he is Lord Commander and if Ser Barristan swears his sword to our cause, he would report to Ser Gerold once more.”

“Fair point. I just would like to have a loyal man help me care for my guests.”

“Let’s talk with Ser Gerold tomorrow and see if something else can be arranged to ease your journey. Besides I think Loras will not cause you any trouble. It is a pity he cannot stay with us. He gets along fine with the four of us, with Edric especially. I guess he is obliged to come with you and by taking him, you remove a person we need to hide the dragons from”.

“Not to mention King Robert will want to hear the report of his arrival at Winterfell sooner rather than later.” Benjen Stark added

“On the subject of King Robert, how was your visit to Kingslanding? Did you see Prince Oberyn? Did you talk to Renly Baratheon? How is Jon Arryn doing?”

“Not tired yet of hearing me talk are you?” Benjen tried to get him to lower his guard. He still needed to address the real reason he had been desperate to talk to his nephew in private. He indulged him and started talking.

“Kingslanding was in chaos. The arrest of the King’s youngest brother had just happened a few days before I got there. I only saw the King on the day I had planned to leave. It was a short audience where I got my orders and was instantly dismissed. I hardly managed a greeting and before I knew it my journey got delayed by two days that apparently were needed to make the arrangements for the conditional release of the Tyrell boy.”

“Prince Oberyn was not at court of course. When I met up with him at our prearranged spot, he was just really smug and I heard a probably rather exaggerated version of his visit to Prince Renly’s
nameday celebration and its aftermath.
My talk to Varys was more enlightening. I learned the King had hardly been seen at court and not
designed to show up at the small council meetings since his brother’s arrest. Opinions about the Tyrell
boy were divided and speculations about his fate were reaching monstrous proportions. With Jon
Arryn constrained to his bed chambers only the more important matters were put before the small
council which brief meetings take place in the Hand’s bed chambers during his illness.
Varys arranged for me to meet Lord Arryn. The man looked very ill and deeply troubled. He worries
about the succession believing our suspicions about the royal children to be correct. He urged me to
convince Ned to come to the capital as soon as possible. He fears his health will not permit him to
govern the Kingdoms much longer and he doesn’t want to give Littlefinger, the Lannisters, the
Tyrells or anyone else for that matter the opportunity to increase their influence on the King. He is
afraid Stannis will not step up and protect his brother’s interests sufficiently. He also fears for the
safety of his wife and young son. He would like to see them firmly in Eddard Stark’s care before he
dies.”

“Ser Barristan had finally gotten the much coveted release from his vows and was eager to leave
with us. He didn’t want to give others the opportunity to change the King’s mind. Varys had warned
him Littlefinger and the Lannisters had counselled against it and were still trying to sabotage his
departure. It had taken Varys and Lord Arryn days to persuade the King to adhere to the knight’s
request and grant him safe passage to wherever he wanted to go next.
Benjen looked to his side and saw Jon was soaking in every word.
“Now it is your turn to open up boy. Are you prepared to tell me the real reason for this trip yet?”

Jon was caught of guard. “Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Oh, you know very well what I mean. Why this destination? Why traipse across Westeros and visit
the western shores if you just want to make a sea trip? Why venture so far north? If you only want to
meet Robb you could sail to White Harbour instead. That harbour is closer to Winterfell than the
Stony Shore and lies on the same side of Westeros as the Driftmark. What are you not telling us?”
Benjen had been troubled ever since hearing the exact itinerary of Jon’s so called rite of passage.

“I have given my reasons. I wanted to test the dragons in a real battle. Well, I really want to face the
Ironborn if you want to truth of it. For years I have heard nothing but complaints about their raids
many of them taking place along the Stony Shore. You know I hate their way of life and I hate
Theon. What better enemy to test the battle readiness of my dragons against? At the same time I
show I can help the North which will help to persuade the Lords I am on their side. If I had to choose
to conquer a kingdom by force, it would be the Iron Islands without a doubt.” Jon wanted to say
more but hesitated.

“You could never pull that off without revealing yourself, you do realise that, don’t you? And that
would not only put yourself in danger, but everyone who ever helped you. If King Robert calls his
banners and we are not ready yet, we will have a bloody war on our hands! Gods Jon, think this
through!”

“As if King Robert cares about the Iron Islands. What good are my dragons if I let the people of the
North get attacked by Ironborn who steal everything they have, kill, not to mention kidnap and rape
innocent women and girls? How can I rest at night knowing I could stop so much suffering easily by
a single nightly attack? My dragons can be in and out in a flash leaving the enemy’s ships burning so
they will be too damaged to reach the shore. You should have seen them destroy the pirate ship
uncle. And they grow bigger and more powerful everyday, I can feel it. Rhaegal even suggests I try
to fly with him, not only by sharing his mind but by sitting on his back!”

Benjen studied Jon for a while. The arguments sounded true but Benjen was certain Jon understood
that what they were trying to accomplish would affect the lives of the smallfolk in all of Westeros and not just a few families living on the northern shores. It had come up more than once in their strategy meetings.

“That’s not all. There’s more Jon. Let’s hear it.” Benjen insisted.

“Well if you really want to know it all, I’m worried about the reports you and Aemon have given me concerning the Wall. If I could fly a dragon out there, either in warg mode or ride Rhaegal myself, I could scout. I know I can cover a lot of ground without taking too much risk. I can make a difference uncle!” he pleaded.

Benjen frowned and looked at Jon, his eyes full of concern. “What if I forbid you? What if I beg you not to do something so stupid? Do you even understand what you are talking about? Do you realise how cold it is beyond the Wall? A man could freeze to dead in minutes if he is not careful. It will be even colder high up in the air. That is if you could ride a dragon safely. What if your dragons suffer from the cold as well? The Lands of Always Winter are not the right location for a test ride Jon!”

“I’m no fool uncle. It will not literally be my first flight. And if I do venture beyond the wall, we will fly a bit further each time and evaluate how the cold affects us. I can feel everything they feel when I let them in uncle. I shall sense it the moment they suffer too much and will immediately order them to turn back. Besides they run so hot all the time, if anyone can stand the cold, it will be them.” He saw Jon close his eyes and look up to the sky once more.

“They are dancing around each other above the clouds now. I can feel their playfulness.” Jon smiled while trying to prove his point.

“Just promise me you will be smart and think before you act. Swear to me that before you just fly off, you will always consult Ser Gerold and or Davos if I am not there.” He looked at Jon resolved not to drop the subject before extracting a solemn promise from his nephew.

Jon sighed. “I promise to do so when the circumstances allow it”, he hedged. “If it is a matter of life and death and there is no time, I do not consider myself bound by this pledge to seek advice first. I will give you my word though to think things through and to try to keep a level head. I will not act if I feel I cannot control the dragons because my emotions run too high.”

Benjen assumed this was the best he would get for now and let the subject drop. It was time for a lighter one. He did not want to end this conversation with his dear nephew on a discord. He nudged Jon’s shoulder. “About becoming a man your journey, is it? Ser Gerold told me about the girls. Is that true Jon? Girls? Two?”

He smiled when he saw the boy blush. “What do you want to tell me about that, my dear grown up nephew?”

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Two weeks later, Jon and his following caught their first glimpses of the ships that were ready and waiting for them at Seagard. Three beautiful vessels chosen from the fleet the houses of the Riverlands had commissioned for their cause. They were fully staffed and looked in pristine condition. This was it. Jon felt elated but apprehensive at the same time. He spurred his horse onward, eager to start his next adventure.
Interlude 10: A troubled little lion

Jaime tried not to look bored. He had been standing in the exact same spot the entire morning. The King had not left his chambers as usual. And to think as a youth, he had always envied the shiny knights of the Kingsguard, knights respected throughout the realm. Some had even songs sung about them. He had been so happy to accept the position granted by King Arys and had ignored his father’s wrath and the real reason behind his sire’s disappointment.

However, nothing had prepared him for the reality of the position. He could count the times he had needed to draw his sword due to a real threat on one hand. And the one time he did save the lives of thousands, he got stuck with the title of Kingslayer. Even now, more than sixteen years later, he still had to deal almost daily with the disdain and derision of the people he had saved singlehandedly. Granted he could have handled that situation better. He had been so green then and had been overwhelmed by the chaotic entrance of the victors. Men, who boasted loudly about having been victorious in several battles and claimed to have fought heroically at the front lines whereas he had sat in a castle, idle, until he decided to stab his own King to death.

Years later Jaime had been able to think back on the events of that fateful day with logic instead of emotion. He concluded he had been in shock. Back then, he had hardly noticed his legs give way and how he had slumped upon that damned throne. He still remembered Eddard’s Starks disdainful eyes and how he had not been able to utter a word in his own defence. After that his world had lost its meaning. He had kept silent and had seen his dear twin marry a man who called out another woman’s name in their marriage bed and broke his marital vows within the first sennight following the wedding ceremony. It had been so easy for her to seduce him in his depressed mood. She had made him disregard the fact that what they did was not only adultery but the worst form of incest. He had been a lost youth who craved love and reassurance. She had offered him all that. Before he knew it he was in too deep and could not bear to stop their shameful affair.

Such was his life now, standing in the same spot for hours on end, trying not to fall asleep. If hearing the Mad King rape his wife while not being allowed to neither move a muscle, nor let his face show his horror and shock when he had only counted sixteen namedays, guarding King Robert’s bedchamber had been harder still. Luckily he had not been asked to guard him the nights the King bedded his sister. The Lord Commander showed tact in that respect at least. Yet, that meant he was often on duty when the King entertained several loose women loudly and thoroughly. King Robert seemed to be able to combine being drunk and whoring for hours on end better than any other man.

Luckily this watch was almost over. He could see Ser Meryn approach. Jaime didn’t linger long after greeting his brother of the Kingsguard. He almost ran to his chambers. But the much anticipated peace and quiet was not to be had. Tyrion was standing just outside his door patiently waiting until he showed up. He was aware he had evaded his little brother once too often. Besides Tyrion was right, some issues really needed to be addressed. He slowed his steps and allowed him the opportunity to start a conversation.

“Jaime. I really need to get Cersei to listen me. Can you not persuade her to talk to me for more than five seconds? The three of us should talk strategies. Our father who normally handles these things is not here. We have to step in.”

Jaime surprised his brother with his immediate cooperation.

A bit later the three of them sat closely together in Tyrion’s chambers. Jaime noticed Cersei was annoyed and would not start the conversation. Tyrion looked nervous and was clearly still deciding how to begin.
“I take it this is not about speculating about father’s whereabouts again?” He opened the discussion by default.

“No”, Tyrion looked at his brother, grateful for the opening. “It is about dealing with the consequences of his continued absence. Father worked all these years to gain considerable influence and we are just sitting idle while it slips through our fingers.”

“Don’t be ridiculous”, Cersei bit back insulted. “I am still the queen of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Of course you are my dear sister”, Tyrion couldn’t hide the sarcasm. “You are the mother of the future Kings as well, at least for now. But can you tell me the King listens to you?”

“Do not speak in riddles brother.” Jaime jumped in before Cersei reacted even harsher. “To what do you refer exactly?”

“All right, I will be blunt about it. Did the King listen to our advice concerning Loras Tyrell? No, he is in the hands of the Starks, what is that all about? Will the King appoint a new Hand amidst our family? No, again the Starks are front runners even if they are not lobbying for it at all. Has the King agreed to adhere to your wishes for a Tyrell bride for Joffrey? No, again Sansa Stark has his preference and let’s pray every day that the members of house Stark stay as noble as their reputation. I can go on like this for some time you know.”

“I still haven’t heard anything insurmountable leave that annoying small mouth of yours dwarf.” Cersei sneered.

“I was saving the best – or should I say the worst – for last. I am sure you heard the vague rumours about your children’s questionable legitimacy that have started to circle these last few moons? No don’t answer that, I’m sure you have. Who else is behind the sudden murdering spree of Baratheon bastards? Of all the stupid things to do! Or do you deny you are behind it?” He stopped to see the murderous expression of Cersei’s face change into a guilty one. He shook his head.

“Do you realise that by acting like this, you confirm you are scared of the rumours. You could as well just come out and confess your guilt. By the way, which blond Lannister have you let into your bed, my dear sister?”

He saw Cersei and Jaime exchange a frightened look and almost faltered. He kept it together and accused them. “Incest?! On top of all our troubles, you add incest to the mix? Do you realise what you have done? We will all loose our heads if this is discovered.”

“Whose side are you on ‘brother’?” Cersei mocked the last word of her sentence.

“Oh now I am your brother, not just a dwarf who was put into your father’s arms by mistake?” Tyrion bit back.

“Stop it, the both of you!” Jaime exclaimed. “Tyrion is right. We need to discuss how to turn the situation back into our favour, see where we stand and find out who is still loyal to us, to the crown.”

“I think you will be disappointed by the short list you will come up with. Whose idea was it anyway to release Ser Barristan from his vows? Another able man who can now be recruited by our enemies. He knows all about the defenses of the Red Keep.”

“Ser Barristan is loyal. There was no harm in letting him have an honourable retirement.” Jaime defended his former Lord Commander.

He was loyal to the Targaryens before he was loyal to King Robert. Ever think it was the only
choice he had to come away with his life that day on the Trident? It was an oath given under duress. You do realise there are still Targaryens alive, don’t you? The Princess Daenerys is slowly reaching an age she could make a play for the throne if she found some support.”

“You should write children stories.” Cersei laughed openly at him now. “You would be good at it. So much fantasy!”

“Think about it Jaime. If not about Ser Barristan, then try and put a list together of our allies.” Tyrion now focused on persuading his brother of their current predicament.

“Have you noticed Prince Oberyn has been in Kingslanding several times lately but not once has he made an appearance at court? Dorne is still hostile to the Crown and the Lannisters in particular. Stannis Baratheon is no great friend of King Robert’s. Let us hope your husband will revisit his stupid decision to refuse him his birthright. And let us not forget the debacle with Prince Renly.” He took a sip of wine and continued. “There is turmoil in the Riverlands, the Reach will become hostile if their daughter will not become betrothed to Joffrey soon. The Vale will keep to itself if Lord Arryn dies and as father always says ‘never trust the Ironborn’. That leaves the North with the Starks. I know they have their honourable reputation and have been loyal, but the King and Eddard Stark are not as close as the King likes to boast and I have noticed too many small coincidences. If I had to name the house in the Seven Kingdoms that has gained the most influence and power these last few years it is them. If ever they turned on us, we would have a fight on our hands and hardly any allies to speak of that will support us against that noble House.”

“Power, that dreary northern wasteland, are you sure you are not just dreaming stuff at night and waking up thinking it really happened? Have you forgotten the Lannister armies? We still have the largest and best equipped force of the Seven Kingdom”, Cersei argued clearly not taking his words to heart.

“For now we have although we are one really skilled commander short”, Tyrion agreed to her last statement. “But we do not have enough men to fight a combined force of several kingdoms. As I said we need to do something to keep the influence and power father has amassed so skilfully.”

“And as far as the North is concerned, if you would try to do something else except buying new dresses, and spending the crown’s money redecorating, you could have noticed things yourself. They have increased trade, not only between the North and the Seven Kingdoms but also with Essos. They have more than doubled their glass gardens, which makes them less vulnerable to a boycott or an attack. I even suspect they are building a small fleet at White Harbour. Father always warned us never to underestimate the Northerners. They do not have the largest population but they are made of stern stuff up there in the North and can raise an army that contains brave and fierce warriors. It would be wise to be wary of them.”

“Lord Stark would never attack Robert Baratheon.” Jaime retorted. “Besides if they turned on us as you say, they would just declare independence. They would not fight us. They would close up the North and be done with it.”

“What if you took the honourable Eddard out of the equation? Or worse what if something happened to King Robert? Their loyalty is to Robert Baratheon, not to Joffrey who looks more Lannister … Seven hells, they could use the rumours to take the throne themselves!”

“Now you are really making up bedtime stories Tyrion. What the hell!” Cersei exclaimed not realising she had addressed him by his first name for what might well be the first time in her adult
“Jaime”, Tyrion gave up on his sister and tried to get Jaime on board. “Do not tell me you have not already thought about some of this. I do not believe you to be so guileless as to think Littlefinger and Varys will side with us the moment we appear weakened. The Tyrells will be among the first to jump ship and the Baratheons, do you not realise that if Robert dies, they could benefit from declaring your children illegitimate? Stannis will declare himself King by lack of trueborn issue from his brother.”

“I admit there is some truth in what you say. We need to stick together and come up with solutions. We could ask uncle Kevan for advice. Do you really think we cannot trust Varys and let him help us gather intelligence? What about Grand Maester Pycelle?”

“Not a bad idea to involve uncle Kevan. Let’s wait to ask for outside help until we hear what he has to say.” Tyrion felt a small spark of hope. Jaime took him serious and had even offered a useful suggestion.

“Are we done?” Cersei interrupted this brotherly bonding.

Tyrion hesitated. “You really think you can influence the King?” he asked his sister after some deliberation.

“Just ask what you want her to do, Tyrion.” Jaime’s quick retort once more prevented Cersei from giving a harsh reply.

“She could petition the King that house Lannister has done so much for the Seven Kingdoms but has no voice on the small council now that father has been delayed on his journey and suggest that I fill his seat until he returns.” Tyrion knew she would not be happy with this suggestion and braced himself.

“So this has been about you grasping for power all along, hasn’t it? Just admit it. You are you finally showing your true colours.” she sneered.

“Actually, that is not a bad idea.” Jaime’s blatant support for his younger brother surprised both his siblings. “You are no fool Cersei. You realise knowledge is power. We need to know what the council and the King are up to if we want to keep our influence. As far as I am concerned you talk your own way in there, but I think we have more of a chance to succeed if you propose Tyrion. You may not like it but he is considered a competent political adviser. This could work.”

“Fine”, she barely got the word out between her teeth. “I see what I can do. Perhaps if you are so intelligent, you can work on Varys to back this suggestion with the King?”

“Not a bad idea either sister. Thank you.” Tyrion said trying to look serious and sincere. Better not let her read any sign of smugness from his face. He considered this a great personal victory.

“Are we done?” Cersei asked once more. Her bad mood and impatience were very obvious.

“For now.” Tyrion agreed and Cersei wasted no time dragging Jaime from the room.

Tyrion took his wine and emptied the cup. He immediately proceeded to refill it to the brim. That arduous meeting had left him thirsty. He sighed. Trouble was brewing. Even the excellent wine could not diminish his worries. He hadn’t shared all his concerns with his siblings. He wasn’t allowed to bring up the subject of his dwindling investigation into their father’s whereabouts anymore. He also hadn’t mentioned he was planning on hiring a sellsword to investigate the situation in the Riverlands. He had his eye on a certain Bronn, a guy he had met at the brothel a few nights
ago. He knew this topic would be dismissed as insignificant by Jaime and Cersei. They surely would not let him spend money on it so he had stayed silent.

He certainly didn’t bring up their financial situation. Tyrion didn’t know what to make of the latest report from his overseer at Casterly Rock. Ever since the big collapse of a large section of the mines shortly after the Rebellion, the mining had not been as productive as before. Nevertheless their goldmines had still yielded enough to support their expenses. This last report mentioned that the cost of keeping the mines open almost exceeded the profit they made these days. He would ask uncle Kevan to investigate the matter. They would have to keep that information within the family. House Lannister’s power had grown mostly because of two things, the reputation of Tywin Lannister and their unlimited financial resources. Jaime and Cersei really didn’t realise the danger they were in. Two fucking siblings and a dwarf were all that was left to keep house Lannister in power. If you looked at it like that, did they even stand a chance?

Tyrion didn’t stop drinking until neither the pitcher nor his cup had a single drop of the sweet Arbor Gold left.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Jon will reunite with some family members. The Ironborn attack the Stony Shore. The interlude will reveal some more plotting in Kingslanding.
Reunited

Chapter Summary

Jon meets family and rides his dragon.

Littlefinger is confident his enemies will go down. Prince Oberyn and Varys disagree.

Chapter Notes

I let the characters do their thing and they acted slightly different than I originally intended. I hope you enjoy it all the same.

This story is still unbeta’d.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon watched the three ships navigate the most southern point of the Stony Shore. They were slowly approaching a modern docking place. The long awaited moment was finally there. This was the location Robb had promised to join him. It was even possible Robb stood on the beach this very moment watching their ships approach. He hoped Robb had gotten the message warning him of their delay. They were almost a moon behind the initial schedule.

Not everything had gone according to plan. Upon arrival at Seagard, they had intended to set out immediately and sail from Seagard across Ironman’s Bay to round the Cape of Eagles to Cape Kraken. After a few days there, they would travel on to the Stony Shore. They had opted to sail with three ships. Not only was it safer and did it give the crew an opportunity to get some experience under their belt, they would also carry glass panes to the North.

The first part of this route was rather close to Ironborn territory. Ser Gerold, Davos and Jon had visited the garrison commander of the fort at Seagard. The man had warned them that fishermen had spotted numerous ships with Kraken banners and had limited their activities to the waters close to their own shores.

To assess the threat, it was decided that Jon would scout the waters between Seagard and Pyke. Since the sky was cloudless and bright, Jon had not been able to use the dragons for this reconnaissance. Jon had used a raven instead. Through the raven’s eyes he had seen what looked very much like a human migration. Close to a hundred vessels were navigating the waters around the Iron Islands. Most of them were sailing towards or between the small isles and only a few of them were leaving. Their guess was that Euron Greyjoy had seized power and was moving his entire fleet to Pyke. Jon surprised himself by hoping that Yara Greyjoy had made it out all right. They had decided to delay their voyage until things settled down a bit. To encounter one Kraken ship would have been a boon for Jon. To alert an entire fleet of Ironborn to their presence would have been sheer stupidity. It had taken almost three sennights before Ser Gerold considered it safe enough to board the ships and set off.

This did not mean they had been idle at Seagard. The garrison commander had given them leave to use their training yard and Ser Arthur had devised new training exercises. The four Kingsguards
fought in formation against Jon and his three friends. The knights never used the same tactic twice and often changed weapons and armour. The boring training sessions were a thing of the past. The four boys also went on small hikes across the countryside and even played some engaging childhood games. Nights around the campfire exchanging tales further strengthened their friendship. On the last night before they continued their voyage, Edric and Gendry payed a visit to the local brothel. They tried to entice Sam and Jon to come along but to no avail. Jon opted to spend the night with his dragons and Ghost. Sam preferred to read a book by the campfire.

When they finally deemed it safe to leave, there was hardly any wind. It had taken them longer to sail from Seagard to Cape Kraken than the voyage from the Driftmark to Essos. They had slowly but safely arrived at Cape Kraken without encountering the Ironborn. Jon had decided to shorten their visit there. The three ships had unloaded a small part of their cargo, mostly large panes of glass. Jon had inspected the ameliorations to the defences Lord Stark had ordered. In the past Cape Kraken had often suffered Ironborn raids, hence its name. Lately however these attacks had dwindled substantially. Jon had taken notes during his visits to the forts. He wanted to send a full report to his uncle Ned. He had noticed several improvements that could be helpful at Castle Black as well. During their stay not a single Ironborn ship had been spotted. Soon enough they had continued their journey to the Stony Shore, the long awaited stop as far as Jon was concerned.

As often the case when he stood at the bow of the ship, Davos was at his side. As admiral of Jon’s fleet he closely checked the proceedings. Ghost sat quietly at Jon’s feet. Jon didn’t have to lower himself to pet his head. Ghost had grown to an impressive size. It was possible Greywind would be even bigger. Ghost had been the runt of the litter when the pups were found. Jon wondered whether Robb had changed much. The boy of twelve namedays would now be a young man of almost seventeen.

“I started to think we would never arrive. But here we are,” Jon said to Davos. “It is an impressive sight watching the ships prepare to dock though, isn’t it? As far as I can tell the Tullys have given us top quality vessels.”

Davos smiled. Jon had been restless these last few days. He had lost count of the number of times the boy had asked how far they still had to go and how soon they would arrive. “As an experienced sailor, I can only declare that I am honoured to be given such superior ships to command. The winds were finally with us on this last stretch, my Prince. Can I borrow your spyglass, please Davos?” Jon asked polite as always. He accepted the offered object and immediately started to scan the shoreline. “I can see a small group assembled at the landing pier but cannot determine if there is a direwolf among them.” Jon sounded a bit downcast. It was still rather early in the morning. Perhaps Robb would not be up yet. Gods forbid he could have been delayed at Winterfell.

“Will you let me have a try?” Davos held out his hand and reclaimed the spyglass. He studied the shore and remarked, “Give it a bit more time, we’ll be closer then. It could be Robb out there even if there is no direwolf insight. At this distance you might even mistake a horse for a wolf. Where are you dragons by the way?”

“They arrived last night shortly after dark. They found a secluded spot a bit inland and are currently resting.”

“It must be nice to be able to check in on them whenever you want. I would not like to have such an invasion of my privacy. Sometimes a man can enjoy some alone time in his cabin. Suppose someone could just enter your mind at any time and check what you were thinking or doing.”
Jon flushed red and looked embarrassed.

“You have a filthy mind young man. I wasn’t referring to that, not consciously anyway.” Davos was quick to spell out. They both laughed and a comfortable silence settled between them. Davos used the spyglass again but stayed silent.

Edric appeared on deck. “How soon will we be able to have solid ground under our feet again? I would love to sit around an open fire and not feel everything move beneath my feet.”

Ghost who hardly ever made a sound whined softly.

“See Ghost agrees with me. How can a man know when he’s drunk if the ground moves when he is sober as well?” He finished making his point.

“He’d know if he counted his pints?” Jon teased.

Davos chuckled. He handed Jon the spyglass again and left to find Ser Gerold to see if he had prepared everything to disembark.

“Can you recognise anyone yet?” Edric enquired. Jon’s nervous chatter these last few days had given him a good idea what Jon was searching for on the beach.

“Give me a chance to find the correct spot first.” Jon muttered but the smile on his face belied the tone of his words.

“Several people are watching the ships approach. Still not close enough to see who they are, and no direwolf in sight.

This time at the word direwolf, Ghost’s ears perked up. He stood up and nudged Jon.

“Want me to look again Ghost. You know something?” Jon never disregarded the instincts of his pets. He adjusted the spyglass and focused on the beach once more.

“I see a figure running towards the shore. It seems as if someone really wants to meet us. He still needs to cover some distance though. Ah there it is. You were right Ghost that must be Greywind.”

Ghost kept nudging Jon’s flank. “All right, all right, I’ll keep looking.” Jon tried to bring the running figures back into focus. The man and his pet had stopped and seemed to be waiting for something or someone. Jon moved the spyglass so he could study the spot where he had first glimpsed the two figures once more.

A second four legged creature entered his sight closely followed by another person if he was not mistaken. That person seemed smaller and didn’t run as fast. Well whoever they were, they still had ample time. It would take the ships a while before they moored and Jon could disembark.

“You’re right Ghost.” He petted his wolf affectionately. There are two of them. You will be reunited with at least two of your siblings soon. I hope you won’t forget about me.” He softly murmured in his ear.

Ghost stayed glued to Jon’s side. His red eyes fixed on Jon’s face.

Jon hugged Ghost and scratched behind his ears. ‘I know,’ he communicated silently in his wolf mind, ‘we will always belong together, no matter how many siblings, family members or friends join us. You are a part of me.’

Edric witnessed the adorable scene. It always amazed him how Ghost could snuggle up to Jon one moment only to turn into a terrifying predator the next when he perceived a possible threat to his pack member.

“What’s Robb like?” he asked Jon. “Will he fit into our little group?”
“I’ll let you find out for yourself.” Jon said releasing his wolf. “I think it is time we got off this ship anyway. “What do you say Edric, do you want to go get our stuff and make sure we’re the first ones to disembark?” He pocketed the spyglass.
He didn’t have to call for Ghost to follow him. The wolf already led the way.

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Jon had hardly taken two steps on solid ground when Arya jumped into his arms.

“Arya?” he hugged her back. “You’ve grown so much!” He released her to embrace Robb who had also appeared at his side by now. “Thank the Gods Robb. I’m so glad you made it here! Have you been here long?”

“That makes two of us.” Robb smiled and patted his back a few times. “We arrived yesterday.”

“Three of us!” Arya yelled as she grasped Jon’s arm not wanting to let go of him. “Oh look over there. , Greywind and Nymeria are greeting Ghost!”

It was a rare spectacle for Jon. The three large animals were acting as if they were still young pups. They were tumbling on the ground, biting and licking each other affectionately. Soon Ghost had hardly any white spots left, his fur was covered in filth and sand. Jon watched them, feeling sad for Ghost. “You must be used to this sight. I didn’t realise Ghost missed out on so much.”

He turned his attention back to his cousins and studied Robb. They had reconnected instantly. Sam, Edric and Gendry were good friends but the feeling of belonging he had felt with Robb all these years ago had rekindled the first moment he saw him again. He felt an instant kinship to Robb once more. He imagined that this was probably what having a brother would feel like. Well perhaps not so strange that he had this bond with Robb. He was family after all. Gods! He so wanted to tell him that. He didn’t think he could wait another moment. He would tell Robb as soon as they could create an opportunity to talk in private. It was all he had thought about these last few days. But now with Arya here, it would not be easy. He still recalled her constant presence during those two weeks he had spent in Winterfell all those years ago.

“You brought Arya along?” He looked at Robb the confusion apparent on his face. “You never mentioned anything in your messages?”

“Surprise!” Arya interjected smiling from ear to ear. She had yet to release Jon’s arm.

“I didn’t mean to. Father is mad as hell as it is. She just followed us secretly with Nymeria in tow. We only discovered it several days later.”

“Three days, I fooled them for three days!” Arya had yet to speak her first sentence at a normal volume.

Jon turned to her with a serious look on his face. He gently freed his arm, knelt at her side and took her little hand in his. “Arya that was a stupid risk to take. Do you know how guilty I would have felt and how sad I would have been if something had happened to you?” He tried to reason with the young girl.

Arya started to sputter but Jon interrupted. “I know you have celebrated your tenth nameday but what could you have done if you encountered people who really meant to hurt you?”
“I would have set Nymeria on them!”

Jon had gotten back up. “Even Nymeria cannot take on several grown men at once Arya. Our direwolf’s protection is not infinite. An arrow, a sword or even a dagger can hurt them. They are not invulnerable.”

While Arya mulled this over Jon questioned Robb. “Why did Greywind not sense this and warn you of her presence immediately?” Jon saw Robb hesitate to speak, probably because of Arya’s presence.

“Arya, will you see to our direwolves and tell them to behave, please? They are scaring the people who still need to disembark.”

Arya hesitated then examined the both of them. She punched Robb’s arm. “You want to talk about grown up boys stuff like you do with Theon. Surely you don’t think I do not know you talk to him about girls and coupling all the time. But do not do this with Jon as well please?”

“We will not talk about girls, I promise.” Robb tried to keep a serious face.

“Well just watch me and see how formidable I am. One little girl will control the three large direwolves everyone is afraid of!” She pointed at the men keeping their distance from the three wolves who were still enjoying their reunion in a boisterous manner.

“I can’t wait to see that.” Jon laughed. “What’s keeping you?”

Arya was off in a flash.

Robb turned to Jon and resumed their conversation. “Not everyone has such a deep a bond with animals than you do Jon.”

“Yeah, but Greywind should have sensed Nymeria. Did he stay with you throughout the night? Didn’t he seem more agitated than normal, perk up his ears more often, nudge you to try to get you to move in a certain direction? They have many ways to warn you. Every time Ghost behaves like that I pay attention. Our wolves have impeccable instincts. You should not ignore them.”

“I do not ignore them, at least not most of the time.” Robb admitted. “Now that you point it out, he did seem more agitated. The perking of the ears might have happened also. But leaving at night, he always does that. I told you about my wolf dreams didn’t I? I suspect he hunts most nights. So I did not think that strange.”

“We’ll have plenty of time to discuss this some more. At least I hope so. Perhaps I can give you some pointers, you know ‘warging for beginners’, Jon suggested, his eyes still fixed on Arya’s antics with the direwolves. He switched his attention back to Robb.

“I’m really glad to see you Robb! I can’t tell you how much I have looked forward to this reunion. I have so much to tell you. Really, you have no idea!”

Don’t sweat it.” Robb teased affectionately. “I am starting to believe you.”

“I mean it Robb.” Jon insisted. I also want you to get to know my friends. You’ll fit right in. I hope you have kept up your sword training. We’re doing all kind of fight simulations. I bet you would like to try to fight off my excellent teachers with the four of us battling beside you.”

“That does sound intriguing. And about our talk, you do realise I stay up a bit later than Arya usually, don’t you?” He joked but a serious undertone relayed the message. “Finally ready to tell me what your plans are?”

At Jon’s questioning look he explained. “Three ships and all because you wanted to see me? I am
flattered. If I didn’t know you any better I would suspect you to have plans to raid our coastline. If I
take father’s and uncle Benjen’s interest in you into consideration, not to mention those knights you
have guarding you at all times, well there must be some intriguing explanation for it all. I’ve been
waiting for years Jon, ever since Greywater Watch.”

“I know”, was the quiet response. “It has been hard keeping it from you, but I wasn’t allowed to say
anything before.”

“Better stop it right there.” Robb warned. “You are testing the limits of my patience with your hints
and we both know we cannot do this here. Arya will be back any moment now. We are lucky to
have gotten two sentences in already.”

Once more Jon gazed at Arya who was still playing with the direwolves.
“Greywind looks amazing. I think he is taller than Ghost.” Arya was now attempting to brush the dirt
out of Ghost’s fur.

Behind her he saw people were still leaving the ship. Gendry was helping two horses to reach the
shore. He almost got knocked over when one of the animals spooked at the sight of the direwolves.

“To me Ghost!” Jon yelled.

Ghost instantly obeyed and brought his two siblings along as well.

“Don’t be scared.” Arya told the young man. “They won’t hurt you. I won’t let them.”

“The horse spooked, not I” Gendry defended himself. He looked at the girl. “You must be a Stark
then?”

“Arya Stark. I am Jon’s best friend.” Arya answered, immediately staking her claim. She had been
jealous reading about some new friends in Jon’s letters. “Are you Sam, Gendry, Edric or just a stable
boy?”

“Gendry, my Lady”, he taunted, remembering what Jon had told him about Arya.

“I am no lady! And Jon’s my dear friend and I haven’t seen him in ages and …”, she paused, “Oh,
just see to the horses.” She turned around and ran back to where Jon and Robb were petting the three
wolves.

“I see you met Gendry?” Jon smiled at Arya. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to my friends.”
Robb and Arya followed him. Arya had latched on to his arm once more. “You will not want to
spend much time with them now we are here, will you Jon? You get to see them all the time
already.” She pleaded.

“Don’t you want to meet my friends? Mind you, if you play your cards right, they can perhaps tell
you some things about me that I am too embarrassed about to tell you myself.” It was the only thing
he could come up with this instant to make her drop the jealousy act.

Arya considered this and her face lit up. The introductions went smoothly after that.

***
This settlement of the Stony Shore boasted enlarged docks, two watch towers, a fort and a prospering settlement. The tavern and the blacksmith’s workshop had been necessary additions to service the growing community. All these changes were part of the Warden of the North’s plans to improve their defences of the western shores of his Kingdom. Robb took everything in. He wanted to be able to give his father a first hand report on the situation here.

When Arya and Robb entered the little tavern, Davos, Ser Gerold and Sandor were softly talking to Jon about the sleeping arrangements. Jon, Ser Gerold and Davos had been assigned the only rooms still available in the tavern. Arya, Robb and some Stark houseguards had arrived earlier and occupied the other ones. The Stark siblings went straight up to their rooms to give the innkeeper the opportunity to greet his new guests and see them settled in. The rest of Jon’s retinue set up camp outside or slept on the ships.

Jon heard Ser Gerold assign the tasks. Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell would each take half a night shift. Sandor and Ser Barristan were charged to assign sufficient sentries for the encampment and also arrange the security on board of the three ships.

The innkeeper interrupted. He apologised politely and handed Jon a number of messages addressed to Jon Celtigar that had arrived in the course of these last few sennights. Jon put them aside for now. He would read them once he had taken his belongings to his room. But first he had to inform them of his plans for the rest of the day. That way Ser Gerold could make the necessary adjustments to his security measures.

“I will spend the early evening in the encampment, with Robb, Arya and my friends around a campfire. You’re welcome to join us of course. As soon as Arya is asleep, I need a guard beside her door at all times. I plan to take Robb with me when I visit the dragons and will not have her sneak up on us. Greywind and Ghost will surely follow. I am not sure yet how deep Arya’s connection with her wolf is, so it will be safer to keep Nymeria locked up in a pen. I presume one of you will follow me and Robb as well even though we will have two direwolves and can take care of ourselves?”

“It never hurts to be cautious my Prince. Besides an extra person can always be sent back to alert others if something looks suspicious.” Ser Gerold lectured.

“I know”, Jon sighed, “I really wanted a private moment with Robb though. It felt so good to reconnect with him. I can’t really explain it but Robb and I are “, Jon paused searching for the right term.

“Kindred souls, soulmates?” Davos offered.

A warm smile crossed Jon’s face. “Thank you Davos.” Jon stayed quiet after that.

Sandor stood up and broke the spell. “Best go see about those guards.” He left the room taking Ser Barristan with him.

“Come on Jon”, Davos encouraged him. Go get yourself settled in your room and read those messages. When you’re done we can enjoy ourselves around a fire and eat that warm meal the innkeeper promised us.

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“A walk Jon, at this time of night?” It had been a long day and Robb was tired.
“Trust me, what I have to show you at the end of our little excursion will be worth it.” Jon tried to persuade his cousin.

“I warn you, it must be something out of this world for that to do the trick. I had a long day Jon.”

“Well, I could hold off telling you everything for a few days, if you really want to go to bed.” Jon baited.

“And here I had imagined us sitting comfortably around a fire with a large pint of ale, me listening quietly while you spilled it all. That way the only effort on my part would have been trying to stay awake when you would inevitably start to bore me.”

“I’ll start to spill the moment we’re out of sight and hearing range. So the faster you start walking, the sooner I can start talking.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Robb got up. “Where to Jon?”

“Follow me”, Jon said and the two boys walked towards the woods. Ser Oswell followed close behind.

“Robb, before I start, please know you are my best” Jon was forced to stop because Robb cut in.

“I know Jon, ‘best friend, don’t be mad, couldn’t tell sooner’, blah blah blah. You can skip that part. I know all that already. Suspected it for years. Just spill.”

Jon took a deep breath. “I never told you who my mother was. We are related Robb.”

“We are?”

“I am the son of your aunt, Lyanna Stark. I am your cousin. Uncle Benjen really is my uncle and your father is my uncle as well.”

“That’s what they told you when you were staying at Winterfell with us when you were twelve? Why is that such a big a secret? Cousins hey”, he nudged Jon. “I often speculated you know. You look so much like Arya. I once dreamt you were my brother, but that didn’t make sense because my father would never dishonour mother and you are not a bastard. It was a ridiculous dream. But brothers would have been nice. I’ll settle for cousins though.”

“Cousins can be as close as brothers. We certainly can.” A hesitant smile appeared on Jon’s face. “Hold that thought though because there is more.”

“Duh, if there weren’t you would have told me years ago. Who did aunt Lyanna marry?”

“Rhaegar Targaryen.” Jon said quietly. Seeing the shock on Robb’s face he quickly continued. “It isn’t what you imagine. They loved each other. She eloped. Your aunt Lyanna I am told, was exactly like Arya. Nobody could force her to do anything against her will. She eloped to escape the betrothal with Robert Baratheon. She had fallen in love with my father.”

“If that is true, why didn’t they just tell everyone? Why let the lies explode into a fucking Rebellion?” Robb frowned. “It doesn’t make sense!”

Jon explained as best he could what he knew about the Rebellion and its aftermath. Robb stood there like a statue. They had stopped walking the moment Jon had mentioned Prince Rhaegar.
Jon hesitantly touched Robb’s arm. “Hey, I’m still me. I know it is a shock but I’m still your friend.”

Getting no reaction he tried to reach Robb once more. “You promised me you would always keep that in mind. I distinctly remember you saying blah blah blah.”

Jon had underestimated Robb’s reaction. He had been so confident Robb would understand. He had really hoped that Robb would just hug him and tell him everything was still the same. Now he felt stupid and afraid. ‘I should have been more considerate. Eased him into it not just dump it on him like that. Is it even wise to show him the dragons now?’ Jon’s mind raced trying to think of a way to get Robb to understand.

Unsure what to do next he looked at Ser Oswell. The knight had a worried look on his face but kept his distance.

“Robb? Hey, your scaring me here.” Was another of Jon’s desperate attempts to get a better reaction out of his cousin.

“Just let me rap my mind around this. You’ve had years. I’ve only had a few moments.” Came the terse retort.

“At least let’s resume our walk. I’ve promised them I would arrive shortly.” Jon said softly.

“Them? Are we going to meet someone? Come on Jon. This is no longer the time for mysteries. Better come clean so I know all I’ll have to deal with.” This was a different Robb than the warm friend Jon was used to.

Jon hesitated but decided nothing but the truth would do now. “Well, I am a Targaryen and a Stark. I have a direwolf but I also have …”

“A dragon? No fucking way.” He looked at Jon. “I was kidding! No? I was right? You have a living and breathing dragon?”

“Two actually.” Jon admitted it was all or nothing now anyway.

“Do we still have far to go?” Robb had started walking again.

“No, but when we are there, let me approach them. You need to stay put where I’ll tell you to.”

Robb nodded and scanned the direct environment. “They are just out here in the open? How do you keep them a secret then? I’ve heard no rumours whatsoever. They are rather small dragons?”

“Well give it a minute and you’ll see for yourself.” Jon sent a reassuring greeting to Rhaegal and Viserion. They could sense his agitation and would not react well to Robb if he didn’t let them know explicitly that the human he brought posed no threat.

“By the old Gods they are large!” Robb exclaimed. He saw the silverwhite dragon first. The green one with beautiful bronze spots was better disguised by the thick brushes they used as shelter for the wind.

“Do not go any closer. Just sit down here. I’m going over to say hello. I haven’t been able to pet them since we left Seagard.” Jon urged him quietly.

“How did you know where to find them? No, do not answer that. That is a dumb question. You bonded with such powerful beasts?”

“I started when they were smaller than a cat and could hardly puff a bit of smoke. When they got
bigger they were already used to me. They consider me their parent. I am kind of a father of dragons. Our bond is really strong now.”

“Can they really spit fire?”

Threaten me and you’re toast.” Jon said lightly but was still worried. Ever since he had let it drop that Rhaegar Targaryen was his father, he had not stopped evaluating Robb’s reaction his uneasiness growing in leaps and bounds.

Jon stood between the two dragons, glad for their company yet all the while worrying how outlandish this all must look to Robb. He really wanted to assume his habitual position against Rhaegal’s flank, close his eyes and share his mind but hesitated.

Ser Oswell who had closely watched the boys’ interaction had grown rather worried as well. Stark looked almost white with shock, the confusion evident on his face and his Prince seemed on the verge of losing his composure. He decided to step in.

“Lord Stark? Let’s install ourselves over there. I’ll make a fire. Let Jon say hello to them in private. He has missed there physical closeness these last few days.”

Robb hesitated to turn his back on the two potentially dangerous creatures but complied. He sat down close to the spot where Ser Oswell was piling some wood. He tried to focus on something else and studied the knight in front of him.

“You were Kingsguard to Aerys Targaryen?”

“I was. Do you realise you’ve received sword fighting lessons from the Sword of the Morning when you were twelve?” Ser Oswell tried to introduce a neutral topic.

“No wonder Theon never beat me again when I returned.” Robb forced a small smile. At least there was a nice side effect to this confusing business.

Ser Oswell now had a fire going. Both men settled a bit closer to the warmth. Robb looked behind him and saw Jon leaning back against the green dragon. His eyes were closed.

“He is relaxing and the three of them are sharing their experiences from the last sennight or so. It always makes him feel better when he can do that.”

At the frown on Rob’s face he ventured, “Don’t be too hard on him. He didn’t choose who his parents were. He didn’t start the Rebellion.”

“It is al so fucked up. Targaryens killed my grandfather and uncle, Prince Rhaegar supposedly raped my aunt.”

“He didn’t rape her. Can you imagine Jon being a rapist?” Ser Oswell saw Robb shake his head without hesitation.

“Well Prince Rhaegar had the same disposition as Jon. Suspecting the Targaryen Prince of rape is just as ridiculous to all of us that knew him. You have an eyewitness sitting in front of you. I guarded Prince Rhaegar and Princess Lyanna in Dorne. I saw them live together as man and wife. They had a passionate relationship. I also witnessed their marriage. Jon didn’t lie to you. He didn’t embellish anything. You can ask your father. He knows some of these things first hand. Jon can only repeat what he was told.”

“But still? King Aerys killed my grandfather and uncle Brandon.”

“King Aerys was called the Mad King for a reason and Brandon Stark could have been a bit more
diplomatic. Not that I defend what King Aerys did. Prince Rhaegar was putting a plan in place to depose his father, but had to be careful. King Aerys could not get wind of his plot since he held Prince Rhaegar’s wife and the royal children as virtual hostages in the Red Keep to keep his son in line.”

Robb did not react.

Ser Oswell tried once more. “How can you blame Jon for something that happened before he was even born?”

“I don’t. Not really. But the word Targaryen has a negative connotation in my mind, at least the recent generation of Targaryens. I can’t rhyme that with Jon. Not at the moment. And on top of all that, he is a not just an everyday Targaryen. No, he is one with two large fire breathing dragons.”

“Would you have preferred not to know?” Ser Oswell enquired softly

“No. I don’t know? How long do we have to stay out here?” Robb could feel his irritation building. He was tired. He just wanted to be left alone and get some sleep. He would think about all of this some other time.

“Do you reckon you can find your way back alone?”

“No! Does that mean that Jon intends to stay out here all night?”

“He does sometimes. I am sure he wasn’t planning to tonight though. Stay here and let me fetch him.”

It seemed to Robb he had just closed his eyes for a moment when Ser Oswell and Jon were before him putting out the fire.

“Come on. Your beds await. We’ll be back at the tavern in no time if only we can get started”, Ser Oswell encouraged both boys.

The three of them walked at a swift pace and returned to the tavern in silence.

When they neared the encampment Jon addressed Robb. “I hope you get a good night’s rest Robb. I’ll see you in the morning?”

“I think I shall sleep in. I’m exhausted. I will have several questions for you later tomorrow though. We will need to hold off Arya.” Robb said a bit stiffly.

“Of course, I’ll think of something. Perhaps some sparring lessons with my friends can be arranged? Sleep well Robb.”

Ser Oswell followed a despondent Jon to his room.

“Do you need anything my Prince?” Ser Oswell was loath to leave him alone. Jon sat on his bed, hunched over. Seeing him like this reminded Ser Oswell of Prince Rhaegar in one of his troubled moods.

“I don’t understand? Everyone I’ve told before reacted better, even some who hardly knew me. Robb is my best friend. I was sure that he of all people would understand me and support me. And it
wasn’t because I waited too long to tell him, it was something else. You talked to him? Do you understand his reaction?”

Ser Oswell installed himself in a chair next to the bed. “Give him time Jon. He has grown up hating Prince Rhaegar. His young mind associates the Targaryen name with the killing of his grandfather and uncle, the raping of his aunt. He told me literally he couldn’t rhyme the word Targaryen with you.”

“What can I do?”

“Talk to him when he is not so tired. Do you remember how as a young kid you always saw a problem in every situation when you were tired? You would blow things out of proportion, get irritated by the tiniest thing. And then the next morning, after a good night’s sleep either you solved the problem in an instant or you couldn’t understand why it was a problem in the first place.”

“Rob admitted he was exhausted. And perhaps his disappointment and shock were not all about you. Robb learned tonight that the father he has looked up to his entire life, the same father that is praised throughout the realm for his honour, has not only hidden this monumental secret from him, he has also been conspiring against the Iron Throne for seventeen years. King Robert would call him a traitor.

And maybe, do not get mad at me for saying this, but maybe Robb is a bit spoilt. He is heir to the North. He has always been the most important person when dealing with boys, I mean men of his own generation. Now he just learned that you are a Prince and outrank him.”


“And stay yourself. Certainly do not apologise. Don’t treat him any different. That should do it.” Ser Oswell encouraged.

Jon sighed. He was not really convinced but wished to be alone now. “Thank you Ser Oswell. I’ll try to get some rest.”

“You’re welcome My Prince.” Ser Oswell left the room and hoped Ser Arthur would arrive soon to take over guard duty. He could use some company.

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The next morning, Jon woke up to voices. A faint light came through the dirty window of the small room. It must be early still. He focused his hearing. Arya was pestering Ser Arthur to let her enter his room.

It felt as if he had just gone to sleep minutes ago. He made a mental inventory of his commitments for the day. He would just have to delegate some things to Davos. He jumped out of bed and got dressed in a hurry.

“Let her in Ser Arthur”, he called out.

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It was almost noon. Jon had taken care of the most urgent things with Arya glued to his side almost the entire time. She had reluctantly gone outside for the duration of his conversation with Davos and Gendry. She had accompanied him when he had visited the three ships. Together they had walked through the encampment, stopping here and there to address some minor issues. Jon had yet to see Robb. He had only caught a glimpse of him from afar and they had greeted each other with a nod but Robb had not made any attempt to approach. Jon could not remember a time he had felt this unsettled.

“Come on Arya. Let’s see if Robb is as hungry as we are. We can all take lunch together.” Perhaps Arya’s presence would help them interact some.

They found Robb in the common room of the tavern. He was talking to Sam. Edric and Gendry were sitting there as well engrossed in a separate conversation.

“Hey, can we join you?” Jon addressed his words to the four of them but stood behind the empty chair next to Robb.

Sam looked up a big smile on his face. “Hey Jon, where have you been all morning? Of course you are welcome to join us.”

“He was with me!” Arya called out. “We’ve been all over. We are not as lazy as you.”

“Thanks Sam. How are thing over here?” he asked softly.

“Well it seems we all slept rather late. Davos just gave me some messages to hand to you.”

Sam lowered his voice so only Jon could hear. “Lord Arryn died and Robb can only stay until news of King Robert’s departure reaches us.”

Then he continued in a normal voice. ”A delegation from Winterfell arrived this morning to take Arya home. They will want to leave soon. Robb stalled them until you were back. He said he wanted to give his sister some quality time with her best friend in the world before you two were being forced to separate for the Gods know how long.”

Jon accepted the scrolls and tucked them in his pocket. “They sent a delegation just to get Arya back? That seems a bit excessive, even for the Starks.” Jon commented desperately wanting to know if Robb’s absence had been as benevolent as it appeared to the others. His cousin had not once looked up at him. Jon himself was still standing, his hands now holding on to the chair extremely tight. He could see his own knuckles turn white.

“Nooooooh”, Arya whined. “Robb, can you not tell them to go away? You’re the heir to Winterfell.”

“I’m sorry Arya.” Robb looked genuinely sorry. “But they have written orders from our father.” He handed her a scroll. “Here, you may read them. I may be the heir but he is the ruling Lord of Winterfell. There is nothing I can do.”

“Hey Arya”, Jon said kindly, releasing his hold on the chair and looked at her. He saw she had angry tears falling from her eyes. “Let’s eat lunch together. Immediately after, I will give you the present I brought especially for you.” Over Arya’s head he gave Gendry a signal. His friend got up and left the room.

“Okay”, she said quietly and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand.

“I’m sure we will still have time for a short sparring session. Willing to take me on?” Jon comforted
his little cousin some more.


Arya ate quickly. She was almost finished when Gendry reappeared carrying an object wrapped up in cloth.

“Arya, it seems your present has arrived. I had something made for you. My friend Gendry is a capable blacksmith and spent many hours crafting your present. Although I gave him a detailed description, Gendry helped make it a unique piece. I think even Robb will be jealous.” During his short speech he had taken the package from Gendry and presented it to Arya.

Arya almost ripped the cloth. “A sword. A real sword. This is steel?”

“Yes Arya, be careful it is very sharp. This is not a training sword. I trust you to handle it responsibly. When you wield that, you must act and think like an adult. Keep in mind that I will bear the brunt of Lady Catelyn’s displeasure if you hurt people or damage something with it without ample justification”, he warned. “I want you to use it only if your life or the lives of your loved ones are in danger. Promise me Arya!”

Arya would kiss the ground Jon walked on if he asked at this point. She was ready to promise him anything.

“I promise on my honour as a Stark”, she vowed solemnly. Then she took her time to study the sword. It was a piece of art. The blade shone and the edges were immaculate. But the decorations on the hilt and pommel were simply exquisite. The pommel ended in a miniature head of a direwolf.

Arya had tears in her eyes once more. This time however they were no angry tears. She carefully put the sword back in the scabbard and hugged Jon for a long while. Then she went over to Gendry. After a small hesitation she gave him a brief hug as well. “Thank you Gendry. Nobody has ever made me anything this beautiful. Truly, I thank you.”

Gendry looked a bit embarrassed and stuttered something before taking a step back. Jon smiled. “I am glad you like it Arya.”

Robb looked from Jon to Arya to the sword and back to Arya. “Can I touch it?” he asked her.

“Yes but be careful. Are your hands tidy enough?”

Robb wiped his hands in an exaggerated manner before taking the sword from her and examining every detail of it.

“Thank you Jon.” Robb said quietly his eyes still on the sword.

“It is for Arya. I have a feeling she will need it”, he answered seriously all the while hating their current predicament.

Jon excused himself soon after to read his scrolls and finish his letter to uncle Ned so he could send it back with Arya.

Not much later he returned for a short sparring session with his little cousin. He made sure to praise
her foot work and showed her new ways to dodge an opponent’s swings. All too soon it was time to say goodbye. Arya first embraced her brother saying a teary goodbye then she went over to Jon. Jon had never been hugged so much in one day. Arya clung to him desperately.
“I hate to leave you Jon. We have not had enough time, not even close.”

“Well now at least I can be honest when I tell you that I am glad you woke me so early this morning”, he tried to tease.

“I wish you were my brother. I wish you could come to Winterfell with me.”

“I will come for a visit”, he promised.

“Don’t wait too long Jon”, she insisted.

Jon saw the wagon start to move.
“Give my regards to your family. Do not forget to hand that letter to your father. I trust your Stark honour not to break the seal and read it yourself.” He called after her.

Arya just waved back stupid tears preventing her from answering.

Jon turned to Robb. “I was planning on speaking to the garrison commander at the fort today. I want to gather information on the raids and assess the threat the Ironborn pose here. Davos and Ser Gerold are interrogating the town’s people as we speak. Are you interested in coming along?”

“Isn’t that my business anyway?” Robb asked in a neutral tone.

“It is if you represent your father’s interests. I just do it because I want to protect the people that followed me here. I’ll let you do the talking if you prefer?”

“Uncle Benjen fears you are spoiling for a fight with the Ironborn to prove yourself.” Robb’s tone was accusing.

“Robb”, Jon sighed. “Will you ever trust me again? Your father does.”

“I still trust you. I do. I just need to accustom myself to this new reality. As I recall it, you needed time as well back then. Let us table this discussion for now and speak about this tonight. I will have some questions for you then. I am still trying to formulate them all in my mind.”

“You can ask me anything Robb”, Jon promised him and then changed the topic to the political situation of the Iron Islands.

They didn’t learn much from their investigation. The attacks had no pattern. The consensus was however that the presence of Jon’s three ships would help to discourage the Ironborn from attacking this spot for now. Jon handed Robb the reports he had written about the state of the defences of Cape Kraken. Robb accepted them and joined them to his own notes for his father. Then he had left on a small excursion with Gendry and Edric while Jon talked to Davos and Sandor.

Sandor Clegane didn’t beat about the bush. “Trouble in boys’ paradise?”
Jon swallowed visibly. “Not now Sandor.”

“Just tell him to stop his bullshit and whining. If he can think straight for two fucking moments he’ll
come around. If not, he is a dumb ass, a fucking moron and not worthy of your time.” Sandor walked away after that pearl or wisdom.

Davos looked at Jon. “Not how I would have put it but he is right Jon. Robb will come around or he is no real friend.”

“It still hurts Davos. Ser Oswell believes Robb is disappointed in the role his father plays in all this and he takes it out on me. He also thinks Robb’s pride might be hurt since I could eventually outrank him should I become King. Can there be any truth in that last part? It doesn’t sound like the Robb I know.”

“Do not forget he has been raised by Catelyn Stark. Everyone I asked described her as an ambitious proud southern lady. It could well be her influence on him. I do not know Jon. Just be you and do not lower yourself or plead too much. You are at least his equal, and soon his superior. What’s more, you have done nothing wrong. Keep that in mind. Be kind and let the situation play out. Remember Ser Arthur’s words. Use this experience and learn from it. That way, even this struggle will have its worth. You’ll be stronger because of it, no matter the outcome.”

Davos had left him alone then, leaving Jon to mull over both men’s advice.

He would visit his dragons now and take Ghost along. That way he could talk to Robb this night here in the encampment without neglecting anybody. It was a cloudy day. Perhaps he could fly along in Rhaegal’s mind and scout the seas. They would continue their journey north soon. Next stop was Sea Dragon Point. Hopefully Robb would still be with them by then.

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That night Robb and Jon set a new record. It became the longest talk they had ever had. It started with Robb questioning Jon about his intentions. Jon stayed calm sometimes referring to the fact that most of the plans were in place long before he had any knowledge of them with Robb’s father as the primary instigator. At first Robb did not believe this. The honourable Eddard Stark could not be the leader of such a bunch of traitors, because that is what they all were if you looked at it from the other side. Jon softly retorted that he was the living proof of Lord Stark’s ‘betrayal’ if that was the way Robb wanted to phrase it. Eddard Stark had saved a baby’s life and given the small child an entourage worthy of a King. Robb swallowed and stayed silent for a bit. Then he started to ask practical questions. Jon answered them one by one often repeating the need for discretion since Lord Stark’s head hung in the balance and by extension Robb’s head as well.

Slowly the subjects became more personal. Jon stressed they had been very patient and had laid a lot of groundwork for their Rebellion. They were hopeful that hardly any blood would be shed when they deposed the Baratheons and Lannisters. He described his dream of establishing a better reign. It was all about helping people and trying to make the lives of the smallfolk and servants better as well.

Then Jon gave Robb an insight in his warging abilities and tried to persuade him to start the mental training exercises Jon had performed in his youth under the supervision of Lord Reed. Jon was of the opinion that the Stark siblings could all develop a certain level of bonding with their respective animals. The wolf dreams, Jon insisted, were an indication of a tentative bond between pet and human. Jon guessed it was the direwolf reaching out to his owner when the latter’s guard was lowered by sleep. If Robb would actively try to reach Greywind’s mind, Jon supposed the direwolf would only be too happy to respond.
Seeing Robb was interested Jon closed his eyes and called for Ghost. He asked him to come to them and bring Greywind along. Both wolves appeared and Jon gave Robb his first lesson. After several tries Robb managed to consciously enter Greywind’s mind for an instant but only when he was touching him with both hands and looking straight into his yellow eyes. They figured it was a promising start. After that, Robb’s attitude started to mellow.

They ended up talking as they used to before about anything and everything. Jon told him about a short message he had received from uncle Ned. Eddard Stark had suspected Jon would tell Robb his origins. Eddard Stark warned them both to keep in mind that the Lords of the North did not know anything yet. They would have to keep it a secret for now. It was the responsibility of the Warden of the North to inform his bannermen of the political situation when the timing was right.

Then Jon proceeded to show him uncle Benjen’s latest letter. One he had received at Cape Kraken. Jon shared his worries with Robb about the situation at the Wall and their uncle Benjen’s safety.

Jon,

I hope you are enjoying your time at the Stony Shore with Robb. I would have liked to join you both over there after delivering Loras Tyrell to Winterfell but I really needed to travel to the Wall. The reports from the Lord Commander keep getting more desperate.

How are your flying pets? I hope you have them under control. I can’t wait to visit you again to see with my own eyes how much bigger they will be yet again and how you can keep them hidden. I haven’t heard any rumours about them here in the North yet. It seems you are doing the impossible once again.

I’m writing this letter from Castle Black. I just had dinner with your uncle Aemon. He asks to send you his love and that he will dictate a letter to you before I leave so I can take it with me. He will take the opportunity to use me as his scribe once more so he can be a bit more open with his information. The things I do for you …

Anyway the news at the Wall is not that good. Every few moons, rangers don’t come back. The Wildlings we’ve encountered are speaking of dark magic living in the Lands of Always Winter. They claim they are being hunted. As you and my older brother discussed, we have set up a tentative communication system with the Wildlings. Every few moons, we attempt to meet halfway between the Wall and their closest settlement. However not all the clans are comfortable with that, and neither are the rangers of the Night’s Watch who have been here the longest.

But for the moment there is a shaky peace between the Night’s Watch and the Wildlings. If only both parties can keep their own ranks in check, things will get better and there will be fewer casualties.

The Wildlings call themselves The Free Folk, an apt name, don’t you think so. They are organising themselves and have named a ‘King beyond the Wall’. It happens to be someone Jeor Mormont knows. According to the Lord Commander, the King beyond the Wall, Mance Rayder, is a former ranger of the Night’s Watch who deserted and went to live among the Free Folk. But the good news is that he is a man who knows our culture and can be reasoned with.

I have talked to this Mance Rayder. He tried to persuade me that not all of the missing rangers from the Night’s Watch are killed by The Free Folk. He knows he can’t control all of his people but most have stopped harassing the Crows. And no, that is not a wrong word. Crows are what the Free Folk call the Night’s Watch. I think it is to do with their black attire. Anyway, do you remember old Nan’s tales about the Long Night and the White Walkers with their armies of dead people? Well it is this
farfetched story that the King Beyond the Wall has given as a reason for the disappearance of our rangers. He even claims thousands of his people have gone missing as well.

We are all debating how to react to this. How do you begin to look for proof of mystical creatures? Mance Rayder has proposed a joint scouting mission consisting of Free Folk, experienced Night Watch rangers and at least one representative sent by the Warden of the North. In short, he wants me to join them. The King beyond the Wall will not come along himself. He claims that he is needed in the settlements and that without him, the constant infighting between the different clans will only give the White Walkers more soldiers without having to lift an icy finger. He will send his second in command along, Tormund Giantsbane. I have met the man several times already. His name is apt. He is a really tall fellow with red hair. I think you could like him Jon, he reminds me of Clegane.

Now the Night’s Watch and I will need to decide whether we trust Mance Rayder enough to agree to his suggestion. I have been trying to figure out why Mance Rayder specifically asks for me to take part in this joint mission and I think I have come up with a possible explanation. It could be that he is trying to plant the idea into our heads to allow his people south of the wall. He would need the influence of the Warden of the North for that. That’s where I come in I guess. If he can persuade me the threat is real, as his brother, I am a direct link to the Warden of the North who has jurisdiction south of the Wall.

It is a big ask, don’t you think? I can’t imagine the Watch ever agreeing to this. They have been fighting each other for several thousands years if our history books are correct.

Anyway this mission will be dangerous, even if you don’t believe in White Walkers and trust the Free Folk not to murder us at the first opportunity. We would have to travel north across a very cold and foreign area filled with wild animals, steep mountains, glaciers and other unknown dangers.

So do not worry if you don’t hear from me for some time. And do remember our talk. If ever Rhaegal is large enough and lets you ride him, do not come to the Wall. It is too cold and too dangerous out here. Train your dragons on easier missions. Be smart nephew!

Well, if I look this letter over, it has certainly gotten long enough. I’ve been adding a few lines to it every night before retiring but I think it is time I sent it on its way.

Oh, before I forget, please write to uncle Ned. He needs some outside advice on how to deal with one of his bannermen. It seems there is unrest in the North as well. Perhaps he will already have sent you a message by now.

Give my warmest regards to your loyal protectors and friends. Tell Robb the next letter I write will be addressed to him.

Keep safe and healthy. I pray to the Old Gods each night and ask them to let me see the both of you again before year’s end.

Keep safe,
Your uncle Benjen

Robb took his time and read it twice before discussing the content with his cousin. Their joint worry about their uncle further cemented their mended relationship.

Robb told him about visiting brothels with Theon and that he worried about the Kraken’s recently formed friendship with the despicable Ramsey Snow, a bastard son of Roose Bolton.
Jon had told Robb shyly about his visit to Princess Daenerys. From there it was a small step to venture to girls and sex. Jon laughed. “Do you really want to talk about this? Remember, you promised Arya.” Robb gave him a friendly shove and all was well again between them.

Robb told him of his visits to the whores in Wintertown and of his subsequent crushes first on one of the handmaids at Winterfell, then Wylla Manderly followed by Elyssa Cerwyn. He assured Jon that he hadn’t acted on these crushes, he had not ventured further with these girls than a few stolen kissing, a bit of touching at the most. Whores knew how to prevent getting with child, highborn ladies did not. He wouldn’t risk his mother’s ire and beget a bastard child. It took some prodding on Robb’s part before Jon admitted to his single night of sex education. Robb didn’t seem to mind anymore that Jon could teach him a thing or two, at least not on this subject.

Jon went to sleep with a clear conscience. He had adhered to Davos’ advice and hadn’t pleaded. Robb had come back to him on his own terms. It had only taken a long honest talk.

That night he dreamed he flew high up in the sky and saw a large fleet heading for the Stony Shore. He woke up hearing loud bells waking the entire settlement. Ser Arthur stood at his bedside. “Hurry my Prince. We are about to come under attack. The watch post sent word that at least twenty ships are coming this way. I hate to say it but I think you will need to call the dragons. Jon was up and dressed in no time. “Put on your full armour, My Prince. And take your helmet with you as well. Best be prepared. This is no ordinary raid. The Ironborn have come with far superior numbers than our combined forces on the shore.

Ser Arthur explained that the fortress was on full alert, Ser Gerold was coordinating the defences on the ships, Sandor was mobilising the inhabitants of the settlement who were willing to fight. “Ser Gerold ordered me to stay with you and guard you in case you would have to warg into Rhaegal. Ser Gerold hopes the dragon can scout the open sea for us and give you an accurate threat assessment.”

Ser Arthur helped Jon put on the last pieces of his armour and now they were hurrying through the building. On his way out, Jon grabbed a piece of bread from the kitchen. Then he ran to the woods mentally calling for his dragons to come to him. “Ser Arthur, stay back please. They are going to land in front of me. I will tell them what’s going on and ask them if they are willing to help us.”

“If you are able to set fire to some of the ships you should know that Davos advised to target the front and the back row of their formation, trapping the ships in the middle.” Ser Arthur knew he overstepped and would probably have to answer to Ser Gerold for this but he disagreed with his Lord Commander. He was certain that without help from the dragons, the little settlement would be overrun. Whatever strategy the garrison commander and Ser Gerold could come up with, they didn’t stand a chance against twenty warships. He quickly stepped back to make room for the dragons that flew in and landed next to his Prince.

Jon petted them and tried to convey the situation by just picturing it in his mind. Rhaegal nudged Jon and lowered his wing, clearly wanting Jon to mount. Jon had done so only once before when Ser Oswell had fallen asleep during one of his nightly visits. He knew Rhaegal was right. If he could see everything through his own eyes he could instruct them first hand to change their battle plan and instantly counteract unexpected manoeuvres of the attackers. His dragons were intelligent. It was good advice.
Still he hesitated and looked over to Ser Arthur. The knight looked worried. “Hurry my Prince, the enemy is not far out. Sit down and do you warg thing.”

“I’m sorry Ser Arthur, but this is the best way.” Jon said softly and climbed on Rhaegal’s back.

“At least close your helmet.” Ser Arthur shouted. “Protect your identity my Prince. Ser Gerold won’t like this at all.”

“Don’t worry. I will close my visor when I attack the ships. For now I want to have my full range of vision. I’ll be careful Ser Arthur. But Rhaegal and I really believe this is the best option. He turned his attention to his dragon and they were in the air in no time. Rhaegal flew high and fast and soon Jon could see the entire fleet shimmer through the clouds below him. He felt Viserion’s presence nearby. He sensed the dragons’ protective instincts flare up but also the underlying excitement both of them felt of being able to show the ones who threatened his human how powerful they really were.

It was immediately obvious that this was no friendly visit. The initial count had been right. Twenty ships were headed for the Stony Shore. They were organised in three rows. Seven ships formed the first and the last row. The middle row contained six vessels. The ships on the front row were only a mile away from the shore by now. Jon flew a bit lower and studied the situation with the help of the small spyglass he had forgotten to hand back to Davos and still carried in his pocket. He could make out the men on deck. They were all in full armour, weapons at the ready clearly eager for battle. He also noticed Euron Greyjoy’s personal sigil on a banner. Yara Greyjoy had described it to him, a red eye surmounted by a black crown held aloft by two black crows. He didn’t hesitate any longer. Minding Ser Arthur’s warning he closed the visor on his helmet.

The first dive set two of the ships closest to the shore afire. Viserion seamlessly copied every move of Rhaegal but took care to target the ship at the opposite end of the front row. Jon steered them back up above the clouds and flew to the back of the convoy before the Ironborn realised what hit them. He was able to examine the chaos below through a small opening in the clouds. The ship Rhaegal had set on fire seemed rudderless and was on a collision course with the neighbouring vessel. Fire and smoke were causing a full blown panic. All eyes were on the burning ships at the front of the convoy. Jon took advantage of that fact and dove below the clouds a second time. He did not fly up until all seven ships in the back row were engulfed in flames.

Soaring above the clouds back toward the shoreline he considered his next step. He knew the men on the beach and the crew aboard his own ships had witnessed his actions. The existence of his dragons could no longer be concealed. He took his time to assess the remaining threat. The four ships still intact on the front row hadn’t changed their course and had been joined by two others. The Ironborn still seemed intent on attacking the settlement. The gap between the burning ships and the ones on course for the attack was widening. Jon saw countless men in the water or still jumping overboard to escape the spreading fires. At least Euron Greyjoy, or whoever was in command had ordered two of the still undamaged vessels to pick up survivors. He focused his attention on the six ships still intent on attacking that were approaching the shoreline at full speed. If he let this play out his own people and vessels would suffer great losses.

His hearth beat loudly when he made his decision. Stealth was no longer an option. He swallowed and gambled it all. He closed his visor once more. Rhaegal descended below the clouds and flew in full view over the encampment, the armies on the shore and the men on his own ships to confront the attacking ships. His dragon stopped mid-air and did his best to hoover in front of the ship closest to the shoreline.

“Turn back or face dragon fire”, he shouted. Viserion had come up next to them. Both dragons blew a warning smoke cloud over some heavily armed Ironborn warriors. They cried out in pain, small
burns blistering their skin, the metal on their armour red hot.

“This is your last warning, turn around now or be burned alive!” Jon tried once more to convince them to turn around and avoid further bloodshed. He didn’t wait for their decision but flew out of there because he had noticed some men overcome their initial shock and reach for bows and arrows. After all, he had promised not to take unnecessary risks. When he was at a safe distance and height he checked behind him and saw the ships slowly turn around. They had aborted the attack. He felt relief, excitement and even a bit of smugness.

He swiftly landed back near the edge of the woods and descended. His legs were a bit shaky at first. He took off his helmet and shook his head to loosen the curls who stuck to his head wet with perspiration. He sent waves of gratefulness to both dragons. Rhaegal had obeyed every suggestion of Jon without a single hesitation. Viserion had been very willing to follow his brother’s actions. What was important though was that they had retreated above the clouds each time Jon had asked them to and had also agreed to leave the battle before destroying every last ship. Jon petted them both and looked around. Ser Arthur was nowhere to be seen. Jon called for Ghost who had stayed close to the place he had seen Jon take off not long before. Accompanied by his direwolf, he ran back to join their forces on the beach.

“Didn’t know you had it in ye kid.” Clegane was the first to notice him. “The Iron cunts are fleeing like scared little ducks.”

Jon didn’t reply, he noticed everyone staring at him in awe. Some went down to their knees and worshipped him like a God. Others backed away looking fearful and disbeliefing. Jon didn’t know how to react and tried to go for an innocent smile. “We’re saved.” He stated simply to no one in particular. “They had it coming.”

He heard someone cheer. Then a few others joined in and soon the crowd was cheering loudly. Jon presumed it was their way of showing relief for escaping a grave danger. The smallfolk probably realised that the only reason they had withstood the largest attack their shores had ever witnessed was this young man. However terrifying he might be, he was on their side. They started to approach him.

Jon noticed a protective circle formed around him and Ghost. His Kingsguard and his friends had all come to his side. Gendry was the first of them to speak since Sandor’s outburst. “Oh Gods Jon, they are so powerful. The amount of fire they released! I have never seen such powerful flames before. That dragonfire burned through those ships so fast. I bet I could melt the sturdiest metal in these flames in an instant.”

He felt Davos touching his arm. “Are you okay son? You have suffered no burns yourself?”

“Their fire can’t hurt me Davos. Maester Aemon suspected as much and I have experienced it first hand today.” He showed Davos his hands. “Look for yourself, I am unharmed.”

“Let us go inside and debrief”, Ser Gerold forcefully intervened. “Best get out of this crowd before they decide they all want a piece of Jon.” He looked around. “These folks need to calm down before I will let you near them again. Let’s get you somewhere safe Jon”, he urged once more.

“I need to get my dragons to hide a bit farther away first. Give me a moment.” Jon closed his eyes and didn’t move for a short while. His entourage knew better than to disturb him now. “Okay, we can go now”, Jon had opened his eyes again and obliged Ser Gerold.

They entered the tavern still in formation, Jon in the middle of the tightly knit group. The warden hurried to the kitchen to serve his best food and drink to the hero of the day.
“What could I have done differently?” Jon was tired of defending himself to Ser Gerold. They had gone over every stage of his strategy at least five times by now.

“You could have stayed off Rhaegal. Just guided the both of them and stayed safely on the ground as we all thought you would do. You’ve blown our cover. How can we say the dragons aren’t yours now? I thought the backup plan was to send out the rumour that the Golden Company used dragons if ever we were discovered. Now they know of a young man flying around riding one. Only Targaryens have been known to do that Jon. King Robert will react to this.”

“We could still deny that someone sat on top of the dragon. We will admit to the dragon. But if the people here stay silent on the detail of seeing me ride a dragon, the rumours can be discredited in Kingslanding. Besides whom will King Robert believe? Some vague rumours that are contradicted by other rumours, or the Warden of the North who knows what happens on his territory. Varys can help us there as well if necessary.”

“Best send out ravens to all parties concerned immediately. Don’t forget the Tullys and the Driftmark. We will all go outside and ask the people to protect the young man who saved them. If they ask about his origins we do not know. You are just an orphan who grew up at the Driftmark. They all saw our genuine disbelief at the sight of you on the dragon. We can tell them truthfully we didn’t know before today.”

“Jon, you stay inside for now. We will reconvene tonight and discuss the reactions of the smallfolk here and then decide how best to proceed from there.

“Edric, Gendry, Sam we will need you to go out there as well to help spread the word. Stark?” Ser Gerold asked looking at Robb.

“I will go as well. As representative of the Warden of the North I can proclaim that Jon is under his protection. To expose Jon would mean they disobeyed Lord Eddard Stark. They all realise how much they owe my father. He is the one who has changed an almost extinct village into a prospering settlement.”

“Even better”, Ser Gerold replied with a grateful nod in Robb’s direction. “Perhaps we should alter our stories?”

A debate ensued. Jon grew tired and told them to get on with it. “Just try and stick close to the first story. It won’t be long now anyway. For all we know the King has already left Kingslanding. If you will excuse me?” He left in the direction of his room, Ghost tripped after him. Ser Gerold hesitated but then appointed Sandor Clegane to guard Jon. Best not let Clegane’s curses loose on the local population.

Interlude 11: Pride comes before the fall

Finally the Starks would get what they deserved. Lord Petyr Baelish was sure of it. This time he had taken every precaution. Somehow these last few years several of his carefully laid out plans had been thwarted. Some had even backfired terribly leaving him weaker as before. It had only made him up
his game. This time he had done almost everything himself. Not trusting any middle person or spy unless absolutely necessary. And finally he would avenge the insults Brandon Stark had shouted at him all those years ago. He was sorry Catelyn would suffer as well but she had made her bed. He had given her an out many times and she had not taken it. Repeatedly he had subtly degraded her husband in her eyes proclaiming him weak and lacking ambition. He had pointed out to her that Stark forced her to live among the barbarians in the North and isolated her children, thereby diminishing their chances to shine in the capital of the Seven Kingdoms. But all to no avail. She had not helped his cause, not much anyway. Well he was done with her now. After several of his assassination attempts on Eddard Stark had failed, he had given up on the plan of getting rid of her husband and marrying Lady Catelyn himself. Besides, he could do so much better now.

At this point, he had more power and influence than the honourable Eddard Stark. Lord Stark had been handed his power on a golden platter and was squandering it away. Petyr had fought for every little bit of his own. He was very proud of his accomplishments. Having started out as an impoverished Lord of an insignificant house in the Vale he had ingratiated himself with the ruling house of the Vale through his friendship with Lysa and Catelyn Tully. Lord Arryn had recognised his aptitude to turn a profit and had promoted him, even taken him to Kingslanding when Lord Arryn became hand of the King. There he had really flourished. His cunning and ruthless manipulation of people had made him thrive in this political environment. Only his arch nemesis Varys, the Master of Whispers had been able slow down his rise to power. Littlefinger had lost face before the small council several times over the last decade. He was almost sure the Spider was behind it each and every time.

But no more. This time everything was going according to plan and nothing could hinder it any longer. The Starks were going down, the Lannisters were going down, someone else was already picking of the Baratheons and Petyr Baelish would be the one to rise like an eagle. He need not be crowned King, Hand of the King was the most powerful position anyway. If he played his cards right he could even pick the house who would take the throne when King Robert was no longer in the picture.

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“I hate meeting here. I always have a splitting headache for the rest of the day.” Prince Oberyn complained. The loud hammering of the blacksmith’s workshop could be heard. The man worked all hours of the day without taking a break. At least that is how it seemed inside this tiny room.

“It still is the safest place I can think of My Prince”, Varys replied in his singing voice.

“Well at least you brought something to drink.” Prince Oberyn brought the glass of wine to his lips. Dornish wine, the best you can find in this stinking capital. You really know your wine my Lord Varys.”

“I try”, Varys smirked and toasted silently before drinking as well.

“Can you describe the face Littefinger made in detail when he heard his ship with well trained whores had been confiscated and the girls were sent away never to be found by him again?” Prince Oberyn relished hearing about the end results of all their little schemes. His only regret was that he was not often present to enjoy the reaction of their enemies first hand.

“That one was priceless, but let me tell you about my smug face when their replacements came in
“You mean your female little birds that had grown too old for your normal purposes?” Prince Oberyn remembered mention of this in his last report.

“Yes, mind you only the ones who volunteered. They were promised that one year of playing the luxury whore in one of Petyr Baelish’s cozy establishments whilst feeding him the false rumours I whisper in their ears would see them well provided for the rest of their lives. I had plenty of volunteers and picked only the most beautiful ones of course.”

Varys gave Prince Oberyn a few examples of how Littlefinger got played by his grown up birds. Then he decided to get on with the business at hand. “Enough of that for now. How are things in Dorne?”

“What have you heard?” Prince Oberyn smile disappeared from his face. “You probably knew before me what my stupid brother has done.”

“I’ve heard whispers. So it is true? Did Prince Quentyn journey to Pentos?”

“My brother was not satisfied with my vague progress reports on the Targaryen situation. Somehow a rumour reached him that a dragon had been spotted flying over the Narrow Sea setting a pirate ship on fire. Of course he thinks the Targaryens across the Narrow Sea have been playing us this entire time. He sent his eldest son Prince Quentyn over there to find Princess Daenerys and marry her. When I confronted him he laughed in my face. He even admitted he had told his son to use any means necessary safe killing her before she birthed him an heir and before he knew how to command the dragon.”

“Your careful wait-and-see brother?” Varys was surprised at the ruthless picture Prince Oberyn painted.

“Has turned into a real viper it seems. Should we worry about her safety?” Prince Oberyn seemed really concerned for the Targaryen Princess.

“My little birds said Prince Quentyn left Pentos with his tail between his legs. I have no further information yet. You mean Prince Doran hasn’t either? Prince Quentyn should be home by now.”

“Perhaps the would-be-rapist is afraid to come home and face his father now that he has fled, how did you call it, with his tail between his legs?” Prince Oberyn managed a smile laugh now that he knew the Princess was safe. Then another thought struck him.

“As long as Princess Daenerys has not pointed him in Prince Aegon’s direction.”

“Never! She has turned down several suitors. I’m sure she is getting quite proficient at it. Nobody gets within ten feet of her without her consent and even then she is surrounded by several armed men. Did you hear she turned down a Dothraki Kahl and suffered no harm? Have you heard of Kahl Drogo? He is called the Kahl of Khals. He had seen her when she visited a local market and was taken by her beauty. If that man can accept a no from her, Prince Quentyn didn’t stand a chance.”

“That doesn’t mean she did not mention Prince Aegon to him.”

“She knows all about Prince Aegon’s plans. They write each other all the time. She understands everything hinges on his existence staying a secret for now. She would never betray her nephew. I suspect she even hopes he will marry her in true Targaryen fashion. She could have married someone else years ago. I doubt there is an unmarried man in Pentos who would refuse her.”

“Did you hear about the Tyrells?” Oberyn changed the subject.
“All I know is that Lady Olenna is still harassing the small council with her demand for a betrothal between Prince Joffrey and her granddaughter Lady Margaery. The King prefers Sansa Stark as you well know.”

“I meant to ask you what their reaction was to Loras’ arrest?” Prince Oberyn clarified.

“Mace Tyrell meekly told the small council it surely must have been a misunderstanding and they were confident that Loras Tyrell would be released soon enough. The poor boy could only be an innocent victim and was to be pitied.”

“The Tyrells will surely harass Lord Stark now.” Oberyn remarked.

“I do not think they will venture all the way to the North. They will send letters to demand his return. In the meanwhile Stark must do all he can to convince them he is only giving him a safe harbour in the North were hardly anybody has heard the southerners’ gossiping or if they did, his people follow his lead and do not give the rumours much credit. Loras Tyrell will have an easy time in Winterfell and it would be better if he goes back home only after another scandal hits the capital. He can hint at the rumours about the royal children. Perhaps coming from him she will start to believe them?” Varys gave his point of view in a flat tone.

“Then all the rumours my daughter planted about the royal children haven’t deterred her yet? My last letter from Willas Tyrell hinted at the possibility of considering Robb Stark for a marriage alliance. I really hoped my little Sandsnake had found the right ear to whisper her sweet nothings into.” Oberyn looked disappointed.

“Wait until Lady Olenna hears of the existence of Prince Aegon. We must see Margaery is firmly betrothed to Robb or someone else before he reveals himself.” Varys cautioned.

Prince Oberyn just nodded his assent. “On another note, I told my brother I was planning a visit to the Wall. Maybe take Nymeria with me as well. I want to see that gigantic ice structure before I die. Prince Aegon’s descriptions have only strengthened my resolve. I came by to see if I could be of use to my Prince somewhere. I could adapt my itinerary to fit his needs.

“Well “, Varys said,” there is the issue with the Freys and the Riverlands. Communications have been muddy. Perhaps you could lend an ear here and there and see if you can gather useful information. Also you could convey some messages in person. Always the safest way. I’ll have them ready for you before you leave and the list of places to drop them off. You can then decide if I am not taking too much advantage of the situation.” The bald man grinned. “It is not often I have a royal messenger. Oh, perhaps you will meet Benjen Stark at the Wall. I would really want an unbiased report of what is really happening over there. All those second hand tales of Grumkins and Snarks are trying my nerves.” Varys shivered.

“You mean White Walkers and walking dead men.” Prince Oberyn laughed. “If I tell you, wouldn’t that count as a second hand report as well?”

“Do not forget the dead beasts”, Varys shivered. “Well, the more sources, the more believable the unbelievable.” He said matter of fact now. “But first we have to discuss the situation here at Kingslanding. We really need to bring Littlefinger down soon. Can we go over the plan together and see if we missed something or if you have additional fuel to throw on this proverbial fire? Varys unrolled a large scroll and both men studied the content.
Next chapter Jon deals with the aftermath of his actions.
In the interlude Ned Stark discovers an unintentional spy at Winterfell.
The aftermath

Chapter Summary

Jon deals with the aftermath of his actions.
Ned discovers an unintentional spy at Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains some graphic descriptions of violence. Read at your own peril.

Small gifts kept arriving at the tavern for Jon. The smallfolk worshipped the ground he walked on now. Jon’s safety was no longer an issue. Even those who had been suspicious or afraid at first were soon reassured. His anonymity however had been harder to assure. Robb Stark’s words had turned the tide. The word of a Stark carried weight in the North. If the heir of Winterfell vouched for the young Lord who flew on a dragon, the people of the North would stand by him.

Half a day later they had adopted Jon as one of their own. Things had escalated from there. First someone had remarked out loud how their new hero resembled Lord Eddard Stark. Next the warden of the tavern, relishing his moment in the spotlight, had let it slip that he had heard the young man mention an ‘uncle Benjen’. It had not taken long before the consensus was that Brandon Stark must have married or bedded a woman at the Driftmark before the Rebellion, probably one with ties to the dragonriders of Old Valyria. No wonder the young man was on their side. He was one of them. Some even ventured that should the late Brandon Stark have married Jon’s mother, the young hero could actually be the rightful heir to Winterfell and not Lord Eddard Stark.

Jon’s council was at a loss for how to counter those rumours. They had talked about it with Robb but eventually had decided to let the gossip die out. The important point was that the local population now considered Jon as a son of the North. Jon had hugged Robb and whispered a heartfelt thank you in his ear. He had vowed never to usurp his position. If their plans succeeded and he became King of the Seven Kingdoms, house Stark would always rule the North. Robb had patted his back and had jokingly asked if he could get that in writing. Jon had stayed serious and said he would be happy to do so once he was entitled to issue a royal decree.

This pact with Robb didn’t change the situation at hand. If he dared to step outside, people flocked around him, wanting to touch him, asking him for a blessing or promises of everlasting protection. Jon was glad they would leave tomorrow. He hardly ventured outside. And if he did, he stuck close to Ghost. Sandor Clegane was his faithful shadow and together with the direwolf they discouraged everyone from approaching. Jon was getting frustrated with the entire situation. He longed for the physical presence of his dragons to help him relax. Just their mental connection from afar wasn’t enough. Jon needed to touch them, rest against Rhaegal’s flank and clear his mind by sharing his frustrations with them. The fact that he could feel their longing as well made him give in. After dark he would slip out in a disguise. Ser Barristan had already agreed to come along.
During their walk that night once they were clear of the settlement, Jon relaxed and listened to Ser Barristan’s tales about his time with his father. It was not the first time Ser Barristan had entertained him with stories about Rhaegar Targaryen. The man had plenty of small anecdotes of his time with the Prince that were entirely new to Jon. It had become clear that Ser Barristan had enjoyed a really close a relationship with Prince Rhaegar. Listening to these tales for several sennights now, Jon slowly started to believe he had inherited some part of his father’s disposition. Ser Barristan kept mentioning it often enough.

During their talks Jon had revealed things as well. He had described his warging ability, how he had named his dragons and direwolf and also mentioned the week he spent with Princess Daenerys. However, the most fascinating tale Ser Barristan had told him during their journey across the Riverlands was a detailed description of his father’s search for prophesies relating to the northern folktale of the Long Night. When Jon mentioned to Ser Barristan what Princess Daenerys had written about this Lord of Light and his dark night full of terrors, Ser Barristan had immediately informed him that Prince Rhaegar had mentioned a prophesy of Azor Ahai and his flaming sword defeating this dark night. He had stressed the Prince had been sure it was all linked somehow. He presumed the legend of Azor Ahai to be the Essosi version of the northern tale of the Long Night. Jon had been astonished to learn that his father had assumed himself or his one of his direct descendants to be this Prince That Was Promised, the hero Azor Ahai reborn who would defeat the Darkness once again. In one of his recent letters uncle Aemon had affirmed he knew of Prince Rhaegar’s hypothesis.

This night however Ser Barristan realised his Prince needed to relax and told him an innocent story about Prince Rhaegal playing the harp to the smallfolk out on the streets of Kingslanding. And how afterwards he had redistributed the money he had collected unintentionally to the poor. The night’s rest amidst his dragons had done wonders for Jon’s mood. During their morning walk back to the settlement, he had mentioned Princess Daenerys once more to Ser Barristan and had asked the knight whether he would be prepared to sail to Essos and stay with the Princess as head of her entourage.

“I would be loath to leave you my Prince. You are the long lost son of my dearest friend. However I am yours to command. If that is your wish, I will protect the Princess to the best of my abilities.”

“It wouldn’t be for long. Soon Dragonstone will be ours and Dany can come home to Westeros.”

Ser Barristan heard the warmth in his voice and didn’t miss the appellation. “Pardon me if I am overstepping, but are you planning on making her your Queen?”

Jon hesitated not knowing himself what the answer to the questions was. “I don’t know yet,” he decided to be honest. “Uncle Aemon insists on it now that there are grown dragons in the world once more. I feel uneasy and somewhat conflicted when I think about it and I certainly do not want to order her to marry against her wishes.”

“As the head of house Targaryen, it is your right to tell her who she should marry, you know that don’t you? As the rightful heir to the Iron Throne you will even be able to determine who your allies can or cannot marry. That means you could choose a bride for Robb. If you think on it, soon nobody will be able to marry anyone if you object.” Ser Barristan told his Prince.

“I’m not comfortable with that, not yet, maybe never.” Jon confessed.

“Well, look at the upside. Nobody will be able to force you to marry against your will. You will be the King. They can only advise you but in the end you will have the last word.” Ser Barristan attempted to get back to a more relaxed atmosphere by stressing a positive aspect of Jon’s future responsibilities.
“You know,” Jon smiled now, “I think I told Daenerys the exact same thing when we discussed possible marriage alliances.”

His face regained its serious expression immediately. “About joining the Princess’ entourage, let’s discuss it with Ser Gerold. I know you were a Lord Commander to King Robert’s Kingsguard but here Ser Gerold is the indisputable Lord Commander of mine. If you have a problem with that, please let me know. If necessary I will try to come up with some other way you can serve me.”

“I have no problem with that my Prince, not at all. I am very happy I am no longer bound to King Robert and would give my right hand to be able to serve you and your family in any way you deem fit,” he assured.

The next morning, when they neared the settlement on their walk back, several children ran up to Jon. Ser Barristan had scanned them from afar and allowed them to come closer. Jon ordered Ghost to remain by his side and to stay calm but vigilant. A little girl handed him flowers. Jon feeling a lot better after spending some time with his dragons welcomed the children with a smile and accepted the small bouquet. A young boy asked him where the dragons were. Encouraged by this another child asked what their names were and handed him a drawing. Jon looked at it. It was a primitive drawing of two dragons in the air, and a lot of ships on fire. He could recognise Rhaegal and Viserion because of the colour they had added to the small painting. Grass has been smeared on one figure and flour on the other. He held the painting in front of him so all the children now gathered around him could see where he pointed. “This one, the green one is called Rhaegal, the silverwhite dragon is Viserion.”

He handed the drawing back to the child, wished them all a nice day and made haste to reach the tavern before any adults would catch on he was there. After a good night’s rest, he felt hungry and looked forward to breaking his fast with his cousin and friends.

Sam saw him enter and immediately gestured him to come over. Jon joined them at the table where Edric, Gendry and Robb were almost finished breaking their fast. They all greeted him with enthusiasm and acted as if it was just another day. Jon smiled. This was just what he needed. He took a bite and listened to Gendry telling Edric about the book he had just finished reading. Gendry had finished a book! Jon caught Gendry’s attention and gave him a slight nod conveying a silent congratulation on his accomplishment. Gendry acknowledged it with a proud smile. All was well for now. Jon felt happy sitting here surrounded by his friends. Now he only needed to persuade Sam to stick with them. The only one who had no choice but to leave them soon would be Robb but they would make sure to stay in touch. He had already plans for Robb to come to his side once more soon enough. They were family after all.

Sandor stood in the corner of the common room next to Ser Oswell. Both were watching Jon break his fast with the other boys. He leaned towards his fellow guard and tempered his voice some.

“Look at him, such an endearing boy enjoying time with his friends. To think that he sent most of those twenty fucking warships to meet their stupid drowned God all on his lonesome. The fuckers that made it out alive probably all shit their pants while they ran. We didn’t lift even need to lift our little finger. What are we dumbasses waiting for? A few more burning shows like that and the fucking Kingdoms will just fall on their knees for the boy.”

“Don’t talk like that in here. Rumours are bad enough as it is” Ser Oswell reprimanded. “Ser Gerold is anxious the four of us will not be sufficient to keep him safe here. He wants to continue our journey as soon as possible.”
“Now that’s not a bad idea.” Sandor replied. He straightened himself up and saw Jon laugh at something Robb said. ‘At least that Stark kid has come to his fucking senses and helped us deal with the people here.’ He didn’t voice that aloud though.

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Jon was surveying the ship with Davos. They would be leaving later that day.

“Davos, can I trouble you for some advice once again?”

They had arrived at the bow of the ship and Davos sat down patting the space next to him. Jon didn’t hesitate and sat down on the familiar bench.

“Do you think our presence provoked the Ironborn to attack with such a large force? Or is it possible that this was not just a raid but an all-out attack on the North?”

“Hardly an all-out attack, Euron Greyjoy has a larger force than that. No, I imagine he wanted to cement his role as strong ruler of the Iron Islands. The rulers of the Ironborn are chosen. A birthright only gets them so far. If as we suspect Euron has deposed Balon Greyjoy, he needs to prove that he can lead them before they will fully accept him. I reckon he went for a quick win and considered your three brand new ships an adequate prize.”

“But why the Stony shore? Why not Seagard? It is closer to Pyke. Was it our presence?” he asked once more.

“I don’t think so. But do I know for sure? No Jon, I cannot help you there. Euron probably went for the easier target. If anything, you should be glad they attacked us here. You have a substantial fleet at Seagard and could have suffered great losses.”

Jon looked sideways at the shore where Greywind and Ghost were chasing after each other.

“What are the chances he will retaliate?” Jon was worried to leave the little settlement unprotected.

“They have their own defences Jon. You’ve toured them yourself. You cannot protect every mile of Westeros personally. Anyway, I do not think he will strike at the same spot twice in a row. He will have to justify his losses. If I were him, I would not attack these shores again until I had a way to diminish the threat of the dragons. You had the element of surprise on your side this time Jon. Next time they will come prepared.”

“I’ll put it on our agenda to discuss with Ser Gerold. I better upgrade my armour before there is a next time. A better helmet would not be remiss either. I will need to train with Rhaegal and test our limits in agility and speed. I’ll also talk to Gendry, see if he can design something I can hang on to when Rhaegal swoops or makes unexpected sharp turns.”

“That boy was a find, was he not?” Davos had taken a liking to Gendry from the very beginning.

“He certainly is, and not only for his excellent skills. He has his heart in the right place. An extra point in his favour is that he can become an important political ally. If Stannis has no male heirs, a simple legitimisation could make him heir to Storm's End, one loyal to us to a fault.”

Jon took a scroll out of his pocket, his voice even more serious now. “I received another message from uncle Ned.”
“At the sound of your voice, I reckon not everything is going well in the North?” Davos probed.

“He is worried about the situation in the Riverlands. He wants to send reinforcements to the Tullys. He once more complains about Roose Bolton’s arrogance but most of all he is worried about his brother, my uncle Benjen. Maester Aemon has sent a raven to Winterfell informing my uncle that the regular updates from the scouting party beyond the Wall have stopped.”

“No good news buried in there at all?” Davos hoped to lighten Jon’s mood somewhat and at the same time gain a bit of time to think of an appropriate response to the issues already raised.

“Well, Sansa gets more proposals than any maid in the Seven Kingdoms. And Bran has had no climbing accidents so far, if that can be considered good news.” Jon summarised.

“Is sending northern forces to the Riverlands as uncle Eddard proposes, a good plan?

“I do not think it can do any harm to send some support. Not too much mind you, the Riverlanders should not fear an invasion from the North. We can discuss this in our small council later today and formulate our advice to Lord Stark if necessary. About his other news, it is not your place to worry about the Boltons. That is an internal matter for the Warden of the North. Your uncle will deal with that as he has always done. If things escalate and only if he specifically asks for it, you can send him your opinion. This situation with your uncle Benjen however, I think it is too early to worry. You told me yourself that Benjen Stark warned you that the possibility existed he would not be able to contact you for some time. Send a letter to Maester Aemon and urge him to keep you informed of every development. Inform your Targaryen uncle where you are in the North and tell him that you are actually getting closer to the Wall every day. If they need your help, all they have to do is ask.”

Jon startled. He studied Davos closely. “You would support my flying off to the Wall?”

Davos chuckled at Jon’s surprised look. “I have seen with my own eyes what you and your dragons can accomplish. I have also noticed you using your mind high up in the air. You followed the initial battle plan but adapted the strategy when the situation evolved. What’s more, I know how you feel about those dragons. I trust you not to risk their lives unnecessarily.”

Once more Jon rested his eyes on the two direwolves. They were now lying on the beach close to one another. He was touched by Davos’ belief in him.

“You know Davos, I heard you mention the term “small council” earlier. I think it is time to solidify your position at my side. As soon as I am King, you will be Hand of the King. For now, it is just Hand of the Prince I am afraid.”

Now it was Davos’ turn to look shocked. “Jon, your uncle Eddard will not be happy about this.”

“I’ll talk it over with him. I know he is happiest in the North. He will be a most trusted adviser and can counsel us from Winterfell. I will need my Hand firmly by my side. I do not think he will object. If he does, then I will be the first King with two Hands. To quote my dear friend Sandor ‘Surely I can loosen up some dumb rule a long dead corps instated hundreds of years ago’. “

They both laughed. Then Davos turned to Jon a solemn expression on his face. “I am very honoured my future King. I swear I will always serve you to the best of my abilities.”

“I know Davos, just promise not to become a sycophant. Promise me to always speak your mind, even if it means contradicting me. I just ask that when we are in company, you do so with respect. In private I give you leave to scold me like you would a naughty boy. If you do not know how to do that, I suggest you take lessons from Sandor Clegane.”
Davos grinned although his eyes were still moist from Jon’s words. Then he became serious once more.
“I promise. As I said, I will serve you to the best of my abilities my Prince.”

“Thank you Davos, I am sure you will. Now I will retire to my cabin. I need to send a few messages out before we cast off later today.

Jon was finishing his letter to uncle Aemon at the Wall when he heard a knock. He opened his door and saw Robb hesitating in the doorway a scroll in his hands.

“Can I talk to you about something?” he asked Jon.

“Come in, or do you prefer to talk outside?”

“No, in here is fine.” Robb entered and seated himself on a small stool. “It is from my mother.” Robb lifted the scroll up a bit. “She wants me to marry Roslin Frey.”

“What? Who is Roslin Frey and is it just your mother or does she relay your father’s wishes as well?”

“No it is just her. She got some alarming reports from a friend and said I could help father by planting the idea of this betrothal in his mind. Roslin Frey is the granddaughter of Walder Frey, Lord of the crossing at the Twins in the Riverlands.”

“House Frey is currently disloyal to their Lord Paramount and House Stark should reward that by giving one of them the coveted position of mother to the next heir of the North? What is your mother thinking?”

“You take the words right out of my mouth Jon.” Robb sighed. “What worries me about all this is that I do not think it is my mother’s idea.” At Jon’s frown he added, “Not at first anyway.”

“Someone is whispering in her ear? Who would do such a thing?”

“Littlefinger!” both boys exclaimed at the same time. They exchanged looks.

“Great minds think alike.” Robb commented. “But all joking aside if that is true, what other nonsense could he have been feeding her?”

“I hate to be the one to say this but she always behaved a bit unnatural with me. Do you remember I once told you she always went out of her way see to my comfort during my stay at Winterfell although she didn’t really seemed to like me? When I learned who my parents were, I realised that was her attempt to curry favour with the future King.” He noticed Robb’s morose expression. “I am sorry Robb, but this situation requires total honesty if we want to get to the bottom of this. I have nothing against your mother. I just think she is very ambitious. All her actions are driven by this. She goes against her own feelings if it will serve her purpose. Her southern education taught her she must help her husband reach his political potential.” He tried to soften the blow for Robb by adding, “I am sure she does what she does only because she wants to help house Tully and House Stark keep their positions.”

“Family Duty Honour,” Robb recited the words of the House Tully. “Isn’t she aware that my marrying a Frey will not help House Tully but do just the opposite?”

“If what we suspect is true, she is being manipulated by a master conniver. I think the best course of
action would be to ignore this part of her letter when you respond to her and talk to your father at the first opportunity when you are back at Winterfell.”

“You are right. It doesn’t sit well with me though. It looks like we’re conspiring against her.”

“Well, your father could always put the blame on me. He can tell her he can’t marry you off without talking to me about it.” Jon deliberately planted this idea in Robb’s mind. He studied him carefully.

“She would never go for that.” Robb didn’t get Jon’s hint.

“Robb, your father has sworn complete fealty to me when I was just twelve years old. I have the power to do just that and she knows it.” He held his breath. How would Robb react to this?

Robb was silent for a few moments. Then a big smile lit up his face. “That’s the best news I heard all day. Now I am sure they will not marry me off to some ugly old maid. You’ll have my back.”

Trust Robb’s optimism to see only the bright side of things. Jon shook his head and stayed serious. “We will all have to do our duty Robb. Even I will have to be careful who I marry.”

Robb sobered. “Not an ugly old maid though.”

“Not if we can help it Robb.” Jon reassured him. “Let’s hope things will work out. After all you are the dashing heir to the North. We will have all the fair maids of Westeros lining up to be your bride. Uncle Ned writes me of new proposals in every message I receive from him.

Rob blushed and dropped the subject.

“Was there anything else in your mother’s letter worth discussing?” Jon asked.

“Only the usual. Arya and Nymeria went missing for two days before she was found camping in the woods near Winterfell. Sansa dreams of marrying Prince Joffrey and become the Queen of all Westeros. Mother urges me to convince father to accept the King’s request. She doesn’t understand his hesitation.” Robb summarised the content of the very long letter.

“She should. She is one of the few who know Prince Joffrey has no chance of becoming King and in the unlikely event he does prevail, house Stark will have been exposed as traitors and will no longer be considered fit to offer him a Queen.” Jon remarked matter of fact.

“More proof she is not thinking clearly but is being manipulated. Who knows what Petyr Baelish has promised her?”

“Keep in mind there is still the possibility it could be someone else. If we guessed right though, what could possibly be the man’s endgame?” Jon had wondered about his ambitions more than once.

“Rule of course.” Robb didn’t hesitate. “Perhaps kill father and marry mother. Or Gods forbid, marry Sansa.”

“That’s taking it a bit far Rob, even for Littlefinger.”

“Never underestimate the man.” Robb argued. “Isn’t that the very advice Varys wrote to you in his last letter.

“It is.” Jon looked pensive. “He wrote about secret messages Baelish sent out to the Freys and the Ironborn. Is he the mastermind behind all this? The Ironborn’s attack here at the Stony Shore, the
Freys’ out of character boldness?”

Jon sealed the scrolls on his desk and rose to his feet. “I have finished here anyway. Come Robb, we will call a small meeting and discuss these developments. You will represent the North. Follow me.”

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They had taken a light meal first and planned the meeting after. That turned out to be a good decision when new messages arrived during their meal. Sam and Jon immediately started to decipher them. Then they adjourned to a more private location to discuss the new developments.

One of them was a scroll from Prince Oberyn. Decrypting the Prince’s erratic code had not been easy. But the gist of the message was clear. Littlefinger had plotted with the Ironborn and Freys. Somehow House Bolton’s name had come up. Prince Oberyn suspected they could be involved as well but how and to what extent was unclear. He urged them to take every precaution. He mentioned he was on his way to visit the Wall. He would keep them informed of his whereabouts hoping they could somehow arrange for their paths to cross.

There was a short message from Winterfell, it was marked urgent. Eddard Stark wrote that Theon Greyjoy had disappeared. He hadn’t returned after a nightly visit to the brothels. He also mentioned there was still no news from his brother at the Wall. But most importantly, Ned Stark reported that King Robert had started his journey north. He asked Robb not to linger too long and make sure he returned to Winterfell well before the King’s arrival. He closed his missive stating he would send a more detailed message later.

A silence fell over the room after Sam and Jon had finished reading these messages aloud. Then suddenly everyone started talking at once. Jon tried to interrupt but didn’t succeed at first until he was helped by Davos who banged his fist on the table. “This will get us no further. Let’s address each subject one by one. Everyone will get a chance to comment.”

“Thank you Davos.” Jon nodded his head gratefully toward his him. “For the record, I want you all to know I have officially appointed Davos Seaworth as Hand of the Prince.” At Ser Gerold’s look he continued, “I will not tempt fate using the other title. You can address him with all your concerns if I a cannot be reached. He will coordinate and bring everything to me. Forthwith he has the authority to open all urgent messages that are addressed to me personally if I am not available. He will speak for me then.”

Not only Ser Gerold was completely blindsided, the others were surprised as well. Several started to comment, Robb being one of them. Jon stalled them with a simple hand gesture. “I have prepared scrolls to go out to our allies, they all contain my decision.” He looked at Robb. “This is the best course of action for now. Things are starting to happen. If something does not go according to plan or in times of crisis we need a clear chain of command. I’ve explained this to your father in a lengthy letter. He will understand Robb.”

Robb nodded and stayed silent.

“Please know I value you all and will always listen to your advice. I urge you to treat me as you have before. This is only a way to work together more efficiently in times of crisis and give Davos a position of authority during negotiations with outsiders. Now let’s start by discussing the repercussions the King’s imminent visit will have on our itinerary.”
The meeting resumed. By the time they parted, their journey was delayed for another day to the dismay of Ser Gerold. The additional time was needed to alter several messages before sending them out. Davos had told them the tides would not be favourable to set out this late in the day.

Jon decided to spend the last night on dry land with his dragons. Jon had noticed Ghost felt a little sick and had told him he could stay behind if he wanted. Ser Arthur accompanied him on the short trek. It was a clear night and Jon was talking quietly with the knight when suddenly five men appeared before them. They had chosen their place well. Jon and Ser Arthur had just reached the middle of a clearing. The five men encircled them and shouted obscene words to intimidate them. Three more appeared but stayed back enjoying the sight before them.

Ser Arthur and Jon both drew their swords. Ser Arthur spoke quickly and kept his voice low but urgent. “Jon, as I taught you, we fight back to back but leave some space between us. Take your dagger out as well. Any chance your pets could come to our rescue?”

“Last I checked the dragons were sleeping. I would need to warg into Rhaegal and that is no option now. Ghost stayed behind because … oh, do you think someone tampered with his food or drink?”

“Jon! To your right!” A big man slashed at Jon’s right side. Jon raised his sword just in time to block the attack. The man approaching from the left got a taste of Dawn. Ser Arthur had already crippled one man. ‘Good, maybe we still stand a chance’, Jon thought.

Seeing his own opponent swing at him Jon ducked slightly and leapt to the left. Simultaneously he thrust Blackfyre forward at an angle allowing him to slip past the man’s breastplate and pierce his skin. The man roared and backed away. Immediately another took his place. Jon had to use his dagger to stop the initial attack. He ducked under the man’s arm and slashed at his hamstrings.

Boiled leather was no match for Valyrian steel and the man fell. Jon adjusted his position to once more defend Ser Arthur’s back. He saw the knight was valiantly fighting with his sword in both arms now, his dagger nowhere in sight. Ser Arthur’s right arm seemed a bit stiff. Nevertheless the knight deflected their swings and parried without the attackers getting a single hit in.

The smug looks had disappeared from their enemy’s faces when they saw how well their targets were responding to the ambush. They changed tactics and attacked simultaneously. Two men advanced on Jon. With Ser Arthur at his back Jon realised they had him cornered. He focused all his attention on blocking the strikes, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, swaying left and right to maintain enough distance to deflect the swords away from his body. Jon was getting desperate. He chose the more skilled strokes that came in handy against an opponent with greater strength than him but he had yet to find a big enough opening to do some real damage.

Without really looking for it his eyes caught a sigil on one of his opponent’s breast plates. ‘Ironborn’, Jon realised and needed all his mental strength to keep his focus. He was still keeping them at bay but his mind was desperately trying to come up with a strategy to defeat two heavy swordsmen without much room to manoeuvre. Despite the noise the clashing swords made, he could hear Ser Arthur’s heavy panting behind him.

The two Ironborn kept coming at him. Jon started to sweat profusely. He rushed blocks to evade their attacks but his movements were filled with lethargy now. His sword that usually felt so light in his hands now seemed almost too heavy for him to wield. He knew it wouldn’t be long before they overpowered him.

Suddenly Jon felt a nudge in his mind. “Ghost!” he called at the top of his lungs.

A man laughed. “You’ll be one soon”. Both men stepped forward and sliced at him. Jon barely managed to block the left man’s swing and he felt the tip of the Kraken’s sword cut his leathers while he dodged the second man’s attack by throwing himself on the ground. He tried to roll over and get
up again but he wasn’t fast enough. He felt the big man grab one of his legs. Ser Arthur fought valiantly but two opponents impeded him from helping his Prince, a third at the ready to take over if need be.

Jon managed to kick his free leg in the man’s face but his opponent just laughed at his desperate action. His partner raised his sword to deliver the final blow while Jon was still swerving wildly in an attempt to liberate his leg from the iron grip and avoid the killing blow.

All of a sudden white fur flashed before Jon’s eyes and the man swinging at Jon had his throat ripped out before he even realised the direwolf was there. Jon used this moment of confusion to get out of his predicament and got back up, Blackfyre once more at the ready.

Ghost stood between Jon and his attackers now. They had their swords pointed at Ghost to discourage the beast from jumping up as well. Ghost snarled at them, blood still dripping from his mouth. While the men were exchanging terrified glances, Jon turned around and faced the two men still fighting Ser Arthur. He had to be careful not to fall over the corpses at his feet. He swung at the man closest to him and cut the Ironborn’s sword arm with his second stroke. The man’s sword fell to the ground. Jon had no qualms opening the man’s throat a second later. His survival instinct had long since kicked in. The man died instantly. Jon didn’t waste time and turned around once more, trusting Ser Arthur’s ability to face his remaining opponent.

Ghost stood there dripping with blood. A second man lay at his feet with a gash in his throat. Jon could hear him slowly drowning in his own blood. He swiftly finished him off by piercing his heart with Blackfyre. He scanned the area. Apart from the men lying on the ground, the clearing was empty. Those still capable of walking had fled the scene.

Jon immediately went over to Ser Arthur who was sitting on the ground, encircled by corpses. “Are you all right? You are bleeding! Why didn’t you tell me your sword arm hadn’t healed completely yet? You were unable to wield Dawn with one hand from the very beginning of the fight.”

“I’m sorry my Prince. He looked at his arm and saw it was bleeding profusely. Jon had noticed this as well and tore a piece of cloth from his tunic but Ser Arthur stopped him. “We should move somewhere safer first. How far away are your dragons?”

Jon closed his eyes and searched for them. They both were sleeping. He concentrated and warged into Rhaegal to wake him up.

“They are on their way.” He helped Ser Arthur to get up and they left the bodies behind as they walked to a big three at the edge of the clearing.

“Now let me stop the bleeding and treat your arm. Is this still the same wound from the pirate attack? How is that possible?”

Ser Arthur sighed. “Approximately two sennights ago it reopened during a rather intense training session. I had hoped it would be okay by now.”

“Let the Maester tend to it properly and no more fighting with that right arm before he gives you explicit permission. When it is halfway healed, you can start to train with your left arm for a while. I have seen you do it before.” Jon suggested.

Both dragons swooped down and interrupted the conversation. Jon reassured them he was okay and thanked them for coming here to guard them.

“I am going to warg back into Rhaegal to see where the men have run off to. I want to know where they are headed.” He warned Ser Arthur.

“They were Ironborn, my Prince. What more do you need to know?” Ser Arthur felt exhausted all of a sudden. The adrenaline rush was fading quickly and the pain in his arm flared up.
“I want to prevent them from getting reinforcements. I also do not want them to know about Ghost or our ancestral swords. The less they know about our strengths the better. I would prefer that they cannot report back to Euron Greyjoy what precisely happened here. I reckon it is better to keep him guessing.” Jon had finished tying up the wound during his explanation.

He sat back and was ready to warg when Ser Arthur protested. “My Prince, I cannot protect you sufficiently during this warg session in my condition. Better you ride Rhaegal yourself. You’ll be a lot safer high up in the air than here on the ground with me.”

Jon looked conflicted at leaving a weakened Ser Arthur alone.

“I’ll be fine Jon. Besides you’ll be back in no time. They cannot have gotten far.” Ser Arthur concentrated on keeping his voice firm voice and his gaze firmly fixed on his Prince. Rhaegal simply lowered his wing making his opinion obvious.

“Viserion, burn those corpses in the middle of the clearing but make sure not to set the forest on fire.” The dragon seemed only too happy to oblige.

“Ghost, guard Ser Arthur.” Jon commanded. He climbed on his dragon and flew off.

Not much later Jon was back. He sat down next to Ser Arthur who hadn’t moved an inch and was still leaning against the big tree. He carefully lowered himself next to the knight and told him what he had done. Only three men had made it out of the clearing alive. Since two of them were wounded, they had been making slow progress.

“I saw a small rowing boat on the beach but didn’t search to coastline to check if a ship was hidden somewhere. I went back and incinerated both, the boat and the men. Somehow I could not find it in me to be merciful. I felt the same during the latter part of the fight.” He turned to Ser Arthur a guilty expression on his face. “Should I be worried? Is this the beginning of the Targaryen madness? Fire and Blood?”

“Jon, during a fight a man’s blood gets up. It was a gruelling fight to the death. You had no choice but to be ruthless. You will just have to make sure you rein in your temper and carefully evaluate the circumstances at hand. Each situation will be different. In this case I am not sorry these men are dead. They would have shown us no mercy either.”

“Still they were wounded and fleeing. I was not in mortal danger at that particular time.”

“They had it coming Jon. Besides, you explained yourself why it was a good strategy. Ser Gerold will confirm this during the inevitable debriefing.”

Jon sighed and stayed quiet.

“You fought well Jon. I do not know many swordsmen who would have been able to stave off those two large warriors coming at them simultaneously for as long as you did. I reckon your muscles will be sore in the morning.”

Jon did not respond. After a while he turned his attention to Ghost who lay quietly at his feet. “Hey boy, thanks for saving my life! How are you feeling? Jon nudged his mind and felt a slight nausea still lingering in Ghost. “I appreciate you coming all the way to help me. Do you think you can assist us once more? Can you bring a few men with weapons here, men from our pack?” Ghost licked Jon’s hand, got up and ran off.

Jon saw Ser Arthur having trouble to keep his eyes open. He knew the knight would not want to fall asleep before help arrived and searched for a neutral topic of conversation. His eyes fell on the unique colouring of the knight’s sword. “Why is the metal of your sword so pale? I thought Valyrian
Ser Arthur took the sword in his left hand and studied it proudly. “That’s because it is not made of Valyrian steel. Dawn was forged from the metal of a ‘fallen star’. It is as strong and sharp as Valyrian steel but it is one of a kind. I think your history lessons have been remiss my Prince. Dawn is the most famous sword in all of Westeros.”

“Perhaps the Maester didn’t teach me because he presumed you would prefer to explain that to me yourself?”

“If that is the case then I must remedy this at once. Legend has it that the Dornish founder of house Dayne followed a falling star to where it hit the ground. At that exact spot, he raised his castle and called it Starfall. The metal of the star was forged into this beautiful sword which is named “Dawn” as you already know. It is the ancestral sword of house Dayne and he who wields it is given the title of “Sword of the Morning”. But unlike other ancestral swords, this sword is not automatically passed down from father to eldest son. It can only be held by a member of house Dayne who proves himself worthy of the honour of wielding it by displaying tremendous skill at swordsmanship.”

“And if no one is eligible?” Jon was clearly intrigued.

“Then the sword will not have an owner until a new generation of House Dayne yields a worthy owner for Dawn.” Ser Arthur explained.

“So it is not sure that Edric will inherit your sword?” Jon knew his friend admired Dawn.

“Have you ever wondered why my nephew has been staying with us for so long? He is heir to Starfall and I am sure his aunt Allyria asks for his return in every message he receives from Dorne. He prefers to train under my tutelage. You must understand that he has grown up with this legacy and wants nothing more than one day to be considered worthy of wielding our legendary sword.”

The green dragon stretched his neck and nudged Jon’s shoulder. Jon looked at Ser Arthur to see his reaction to being so close to the dragon but Ser Arthur had dosed off. He must have lost more blood than I thought. He was glad now he had not left him and had decided to just send Ghost for help.

He slowly scratched the scales on Rhaegal’s cheek. “You were amazing as always Rhaegal. Viserion you were as well. He checked the small fires that had almost died down”. He petted the silverwhite dragon. “Do you mind staying here with us for a while? Keep us safe until help arrives?” Both dragons nestled themselves in a wide circle. Ser Arthur and Jon were safely ensconced in the middle. Jon leaned into Rhaegal’s flank and closed his eyes. He could rest a bit as well. The dragons would look out for them.

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“Why didn’t you take at least two guards along?” Davos asked him. Davos and his entire Kingsguard were sitting in their usual meeting room in the tavern. Jon was the only one left answering questions. Ser Arthur had been obligated to leave the room a few moments before at the insistence of the Maester who had overruled Ser Gerold, firmly stating no debriefing could be more important than saving the knight’s sword arm. At least Ghost lay loyally at Jon’s feet so he did not feel entirely deserted.

“I reckoned one guard was sufficient when I visit my dragons.” Jon realised he had been careless.
Davos turned to Ser Gerold. “Didn’t you double security after the Ironborn attack? And why the hell was Ghost not there from the beginning?”

Ghost lifted his head and whined quietly.

“Ghost felt sick.” Jon defended his loyal direwolf. “I told him it was okay to stay behind. It is possible someone tampered with his food or drink on purpose. I could sense how nauseous he was.”

“All the more reason to double your guard.” Davos looked over to Ser Gerold. The man looked as guilty as if he had committed treason.”

“I apologise my Prince. I was so busy arranging the security for the next few days that I didn’t check your plans this night. I just assumed you were staying in the building where the risk of an attack was small. I should have checked.”

“And I should have mentioned it to you.” Jon assumed part of the guilt “Let’s learn from this and move forward. I am worried about Ser Arthur’s arm. Did you know he had re-injured it a while back and it hadn’t healed completely? He used both hands to wield Dawn even before his wound reopened.”

Ser Gerold looked at Ser Oswell who just shrugged his shoulders. Sandor straightforward as always was the one to speak up. “Should have known the guy was not just teaching us clumsy fools by letting us spar amongst ourselves or with the boys while he just watched from the side lines. When he corrected me for overextending my fucking backswing, I accused him of being a lazy fucker. Should have realised he was still hurt.” Sandor shook his head feeling really stupid.

Davos gave Jon a once over. “Are you all right my Prince?”

“I might have a sore knee come morning. It got twisted during battle. I told you how a strong man gripped my leg. The rest of my injuries are not worth mentioning, just a small cut and some bruises.” Jon stretched his leg carefully showing them all the swelling around his knee.

“Have it looked at by the Maester as soon as he is finished tending to Ser Arthur.” Davos made Jon promise.

Ser Gerold spoke up. “I insist we still leave as planned tomorrow but not at first light. Davos, I trust the tide will still be favourable if we leave a bit later?”

“Yes, as long as we leave before noon, we should be okay.” Davos affirmed.

“Sandor, Ser Barristan can you take over guard duty from Ser Arthur and see to it that Blackfyre and Dawn are cleaned and made battle ready again? Have Gendry check both swords first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I will care for Blackfyre myself. I’ll have ample time since I will not be able to sleep before I know Ser Arthur is alright.” Jon was quick to say.

“Do not tarry too long. And keep in mind I will want a play by play tomorrow Jon. You, Ser Arthur and I will analyse this at length. But for now, know I am proud of your fighting prowess. Ser Arthur assured me you did well.” He patted Jon’s shoulder and sighed wearily. “I’ll retire now. I plan to get up early so I can be the one to release Sandor and Ser Barristan from their duties before dawn.

Jon just nodded, sat down and started to clean Blackfyre with an oiled cloth. The slow long swipes calmed his mind. He kept at it for a long time.
The next morning Jon had trouble keeping up with the fuss his friends were making. They were sorry they had missed the commotion last night and were talking about it animatedly, exaggerating and even playacting parts of it. The survivor elation from last night had left Jon. He felt exhausted and terribly guilty. Normally he would go and talk to Davos but Jon didn’t think Davos would have much experience with the feelings he was struggling with. He looked up and considered Ser Oswell. The knight clearly had guard duty and was very alert. It was better not to distract him with a difficult conversation.

Sam noticed his distress and nudged Robb. When Robb gave Sam his attention, Sam looked pointedly at Jon. Robb immediately got with program. He left Gendry and Edric to their lively discussion and went over to Jon. Soon both boys were leaving the common room, supposedly to help each other pack. Jon leaned on Robb a bit to spare his sore knee.

They stopped at Jon’s room. Ser Oswell opened the door so his Prince could keep his grip on Robb. Jon sighed when he lowered himself to the bed. He moved backwards until he sat up with his back against the headrest of the bed, a bunch of furs supporting his bad knee.

“Is it the pain in your knee that is affecting your mood or is something else troubling you?” Robb decided not to waste time with small talk.

“My knee hurts somewhat when I put weight on it for sure but what do you mean when you mention my mood?”

“I know you think you’re handsome when you brood, but now you are overdoing it and it is spoiling your looks. I can’t have you destroy our reputation of most handsome cousins in the North now, can I?” Robb tried a teasing tone. “Did something else happen last night?”

Jon was silent for a few moments. When he spoke up he sounded tentative. “Robb have you ever killed someone?”

“You know I have.” Robb frowned. “I wrote you about the ambush last year when I was out hunting with Theon.”

“That was clearly a case of self-defence. Have you ever taken a life when there was no direct threat?” He amended his earlier question.

“That occasion was the first and only time I killed someone thus far.” Robb stiffened. “What are you trying to tell me Jon?”

Jon’s heart pounded wildly but he wanted to tell someone, he really needed to hear someone else absolve him of this guilt. He took a deep breath. “Last night, when our attackers gave up, the three men still alive fled in the direction of the beach. I called Rhaegal and flew after them. I destroyed their small rowing boat and burned the three men before they could join their ship. Two of them were wounded. I killed three men and it was not in a fair fight Robb.” He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head not wanting to witness Robb’s potential disgust.

Robb slowly installed himself on the other end of Jon's bed and faced him. “Why?” he just asked staying very calm.
Jon looked up now. He was surprised nothing more was forthcoming. Whatever he had expected, Robb’s patient reaction and willingness to let Jon explain himself further was not it. His subconscious was clearly still struggling with Robb’s initial reaction to his parentage. However this was a different Robb. Actually this was the same Robb who had suddenly pulled a 180 and defended Jon to the smallfolk at the Stony Shore. He decided to make a conscious effort to trust his cousin unconditionally once more. The friend he had always known and loved was back again.

Jon repeated what he had discussed with Ser Arthur last night. “It was a calculated move on my part to weaken the enemy, prevent them from revealing our whereabouts and sending others to finish the job, as well as reporting other intelligence. For example the fact that we have skilled fighters, more than decent swords and a dangerous direwolf.”

“Sounds reasonable enough,” Robb retorted. “It still doesn’t explain the ugly brooding.”

“I can’t prevent myself from feeling guilty. I keep second guessing my actions of last night.” Jon admitted. He felt relieved however. The knot in his stomach had loosened a bit.

“Well let me repeat the platitude my father spouted after my first kill. You should be worried the day you don’t feel anything when you kill someone. He says he still feels guilty every time he takes a life no matter how justified his actions are.”

“That does make me feel a bit better Robb, thanks.” Jon’s lips even turned upwards a bit.

Robb rose from the bed. “Now about packing our things, do you need help or can you fend for yourself?”

“I have it in hand. Thanks Robb.”

“Always,” Robb said and left the room adding in the doorway, “You should thank Sam as well.”

Jon watched the empty doorway mulling over Robb’s cryptic last words.

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A few days later Jon sat on the bench at the bow of the deck. Ser Oswell was his faithful shadow this time, but it didn’t take long for the familiar figure of Davos Seaworth to appear next to him.

“I see you are wise enough to dress appropriately.” Davos opened the conversation. Jon had indeed enveloped himself in a wide coat with a broad fur collar. A harsh wind was blowing and it had gotten decidedly colder. They had been heading further north and were slowly approaching Sea Dragon Point. They would make a short stop there just to make contact with the outside world. Jon hoped he would at least get word from Maester Aemon about uncle Benjen. They also expected updates from their allies in different parts of the Seven Kingdoms.

“How is your knee? Ser Barristan mentioned you were walking around without a limp this morning.”

“Much better thank you. I am not yet able to run at full speed or make a sudden left turn, but I’m getting there. I am still excused from sword practice.”

Jon looked up when he heard the warning bell from the lookout in the crow’s nest. Davos took out
his spyglass and searched the direction the boy high up in mast was pointing towards.

A ship approached them from the port side. “It is a single ship.” Davos informed Jon. “It is coming toward us at full speed. It won’t be long before we can see a banner or a sigil on a sail.”

“Just the one ship?” Jon looked relieved. “Then they will not intend to attack. Perhaps they are in need of assistance?”

Davos kept his spyglass trained on the approaching vessel. “Ser Oswell, alert Ser Gerold. It is an Ironborn ship.”

“Is it Euron’s sigil or the normal golden kraken on a black field?” Jon wanted to know.

Davos handed him the spyglass. "Look for yourself Jon, I am loath to admit it but there is the possibility your eyesight is better than mine." He stood behind Jon and pointed the spyglass in the right direction.

“It is a golden kraken. So chances are it is not Euron. Wait, they are raising another flag, a white flag Davos. Why would they surrender to us if we are not attacking?”

“Well usually in these situations we allow a sloop to approach and after some shouting decide whether or not to allow a small delegation to climb on board to negotiate.”

“You know, I would like to have my own spyglass, a small one that fits easily in my pocket. Yours came in very handy when I was high up in the air during Euron Greyjoy’s attack. “

Before Davos could reply Ser Gerold was there.

“Fill me in.” Ser Gerold commanded his voice brusque. He was breathing profusely. He had clearly run the entire way. Sandor, Ser Barristan and Ser Oswell arrived on deck as well.

“A single Ironborn ship is approaching fast. It just hoisted a white flag. We suspect it is not aligned with Euron Greyjoy.” Davos briefly summarised.

“Sandor, see to it that the chief mate signals our other ships. I want everyone at their battle positions. You are responsible for our crew. We will take no chances. Davos, I want everyone with spyglasses keeping an eye on that ship. Alert me on the slightest movement. And as soon as you can count the number of persons visible on deck I want to know as well. ”

“My Prince, alert your friends and keep Ghost at your side at all times. I would like very much for you to stay inside until we know more.”

“I’ll be up on the bridge but will stay near the doorway, mostly out of sight. That way I will still be able to assess the situation myself.” Jon stood his ground.

Ser Gerold nodded and sighed when he saw his Prince disappear inside. ‘Why did we ever consent to this damned journey?’

Interlude 12: Unintended betrayal

Catelyn Stark was confused. Petyr had sent her such disturbing messages lately. Now he urged Robb
to marry Roslin Frey. What was that all about? The Freys and the Tullys didn’t get along. He had lived in the Riverlands and knew that. The Freys were cowards, manipulating thieving cowards. Catelyn hated the toll she had to pay each time she passed through the Twins when she went to visit her kin. I didn’t help her one bit that she was the daughter of their Lord Paramount. They insisted on charging an exorbitant fee for her crossing each and every time. Besides, could you imagine seeing her handsome son married to an ugly Frey? No, she didn’t understand Petyr at all this time. What’s more, he even hinted at a betrothal between Sansa and Domeric Bolton. As if she would let her innocent Sansa join such a cruel house. Had Petyr given up on the betrothal of Sansa and Prince Joffrey? Did he know something that hadn’t reached her ears yet? Surely King Robert had not already promised the Crown Prince’s hand to another fair maiden?

Life at Winterfell was getting complicated. First there was this vile Ironborn ward they had been ordered to take in. He had taken Robb to visit a brothel when her son had not yet celebrated his fourteenth nameday. The Kraken was arrogant, vulgar and extremely disrespectful sometimes. No she didn’t like him at all. When she complained to Ned about it, he just shrugged and said there was nothing he could do. As long as the King considered him a hostage, Ned would have to do his duty.

Then there was that entire business with his nephew. That was a hornet’s nest if ever there was one. Thanks to that situation, Ned was hesitant to betroth her Sansa to Prince Joffrey. If not for the existence of the Targaryen, Sansa could be queen. One day she had been so frustrated that she had betrayed her ambition to Ned about it, he just shrugged and said there was nothing he could do. As long as the King considered him a hostage, Ned would have to do his duty. Catelyn on the other hand would love nothing better. She was confident her children would thrive there. Well perhaps not Arya, but she was still young. Sansa and Robb could make excellent matches in the capital.

Theoretically Robb had already reached a marriageable age. She knew for a fact Ned received countless betrothal proposals but as far as she was aware he hadn’t accepted a single one. It was vexing. Petyr was right, her husband and not the slightest sliver of ambition. Perhaps she should have listened to him all these years ago but she had stood by her husband like a lovesick puppy. Now she was not that sure anymore she had made the right decision. Even the message suggesting he could be named Hand of the King if Lord Arryn died, filled Ned with dread. Not because he would mourn the loss of his foster father but because her husband didn’t want to become Hand of the King. He didn’t want to live in Kingslanding. Catelyn on the other hand would love nothing better. She was confident her children would thrive there. Well perhaps not Arya, but she was still young. Sansa and Robb could make excellent matches in the capital.

Well, she was only the lady of Winterfell and had to obey her Lord Husband. She sighed. Ned had become more distant after the birth of Rickon. The Maester had warned her after that difficult birth that the chances she would deliver another healthy child and come out of it alive herself were slim. Ned had comforted her by declaring that his three sons and two daughters were a greater blessing than he ever would have dared ask from the Gods. He had started to sleep in his own room, at first not to disturb her sleep because of the baby that hindered her night’s rest, but later he had used the excuse of working late, lots of meetings and visits from his bannermen. Ned had started to travel more surveying several projects in his large Kingdom. Slowly but surely he had grown more distant. She had retreated into her cold southern manners and he had changed back into the quiet solemn man of the first year of their marriage, one who confided in her less and less.

Catelyn blamed Jon or Prince Aegon for that matter. Of course she hadn’t uttered a word to Petyr about all this. She wasn’t stupid, she preferred her own head clearly fixed on her body but she had sent him little titbits about Ned’s reluctance to leave the North. The amount of trouble he went through to keep the North’s strength up and several other little details Petyr often enquired about. Lately he had become increasingly interested in the whereabouts of Ned and Benjen. In his last letter he had even started to ask a lot of questions about Robb. She had always trusted Petyr but now she was starting to get wary.
However he had written her that if she got Robb to marry Roslin Frey, she, Catelyn Stark and not her husband the all and mighty Warden, could take full credit for restoring the peace to the Riverlands and help her family who had gotten themselves into trouble by demanding unreasonable things from their vassal house. Littlefinger had suggested the King could take away their status of ruling family if the troubles persisted.

She looked outside. The sun was slowly losing its heat. It was time to fetch her daughters and visit the Sept.

“Why do I always have to visit the Sept with you when Robb, Bran and Rickon do not have to? They can visit the Godswood. I like the Godswood better. Even Jon worships the old Gods mother.” Arya protested.

Ever since Arya had returned from her forbidden trip to the Stony Shore she talked of nothing but Jon and his direwolf or Jon and his cool friends. Arya would be the death of her. If only she had been a boy, then her attitude could be explained. But no, it was up to her to make a lady out of Arya, a lady suitable to marry an important Lord to improve the connections of house Stark, not that Ned seemed bothered with that. He indulged Arya, turned a blind eye when Robb included her in the sword lessons he sometimes gave Bran and Rickon when the Master at Arms was too busy. When Catelyn dared to protest he just waved her concerns away and ordered her to let Arya be. She was just as his sister Lyanna, a female wolf of Winterfell. Ned had such an endearing look on his face when he talked about his sister. Yet Catelyn didn’t want Arya to become a second Lyanna. Gods forbid!

She saw Arya looking up at her expectantly. Apparently her prolonged silence had given the child the hope she wouldn’t have to pray to the Seven today. Catelyn was tired of fighting this uphill battle with Arya. She relented for now. She would pick her fight with this child when it really mattered. She would find her a husband capable of handling her.

“Off you go then. The Gods will only hear prayers from people who are truthful in their beliefs. But I will inspect your room later and I will punish you if it is not in pristine condition,” she soured Arya’s victory. “Come on Sansa, I believe the Gods have waited long enough.”

Sansa followed her mother like a docile sheep. Catelyn didn’t suspect that Sansa envied Arya her freedom. Sansa just didn’t like to contradict her mother. She hated conflicts and always tried to keep the peace. So she put her own wishes and feelings aside for now, but one day…

Arya ran off before her mother could change her mind. Not seeing where she ran she bumped into Lady Brienne of Tarth.

“Hey watch where you are going.” The lady admonished.

“I am sorry.” Arya was genuinely sorry. “She admired Lady Brienne greatly. Loras Tyrell had told her that Lady Brienne had bested more than one knight in single combat. She had been a sworn sword to a Prince but Loras wouldn’t tell her why she wasn’t any longer.

“I was looking for you actually,” Brienne of Tarth said to Arya.

“For me? Not another chore please?” Arya pleaded.

“Well, if you consider it a chore, take it up with your father, girl. He wants me to teach you to fight. I am to give you daily lessons.”
“For real, fight with a sword?” Arya looked at Brienne unbelief shining out of her big eyes.

“Sword, bow, dagger and whatever I deem necessary.” Brienne was sure Arya would be a most eager pupil.

“Mother agreed to that?” Hope now filled the young girl’s features.

“I have my orders from your father. I think he trumps your mother.” Lady Brienne raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Can we start today?” Arya was getting excited now. No more stolen moments when Robb could spare the time. Robb had not been home for ages and as a consequence she had not had any real training since that short session with Jon at the Stony Shore.

“We will go to the armoury and gather everything you need. It will be getting dark soon anyway. We start tomorrow morning. I must warn you though; I do not know how long I will be at Winterfell. However for the time being, you’ll be getting daily lessons in the morning. We will meet every day after breakfast. I have cleared it with your father. He will arrange your other lessons to start after our session when you have freshened up and put on some decent clothes.”

“Will you still train with Loras?” Arya asked.

“Of course, Loras and I need to stay in shape. Hopefully we can both return south soon. Perhaps I can serve his father.”

“Why can’t you serve here in the North, or better even serve Jon? He has knights in his service. Perhaps he can make you a knight as well.”

“Who is that? I haven’t met a Jon here at Winterfell?” Brienne asked.

“Jon Celtigar, he is kind of my adopted brother. It was him Robb and I visited at the Stony Shore. Robb is still there. Jon can fight really well. Robb says he has the best teachers in the entire realm in his service. Not one but three highly skilled knights. I do not think you would be able to beat Jon. Robb says he can’t. I am sure you would love to spar with those three knight.” Arya told her, the excitement evident in her speech.

“When I have the opportunity to speak to your father again, I will ask him about that.” Brienne now realised that the object of the girl’s hero worship was none other than the curious Jon Celtigar she had encountered in the Riverlands a few moons ago. She doubted the man would be looking for a lady protector having met the three former Kingsguards he had surrounded himself with not to mention the formidable Sandor Clegane. She clearly remembered how exited she had been when they had allowed her to join a sparring session with them one morning shortly before they had to part because she would follow Benjen Stark to Riverrun. She had relished the opportunity and had learned several new moves.

Of course she had not been able to beat any of the knights. Only against Sandor Clegane she had lasted a bit longer, but only because she had used a few dirty tricks. Her ego had been hurt by the brevity of her previous bouts and she had been desperate for a win by then. She hadn’t won against Sandor Clegane either in the end. The man however had shaken her hand and had declared her a bonny fighter. Jon Celtigar had come up and congratulated her. He had laughed and informed her that this was the first time he had ever heard Sandor use such a pretty word.

“Celtigar is not a Northern name?” This young man had intrigued her from the very first moment she had met him and his direwolf. She was eager to find out why he was so such a close friend to House
Stark. When Arya had mentioned the term adopted brother her mind had conjured up his image and
she admitted he somewhat resembled Arya.

“He normally lives at the Driftmark but he is travelling now.” Arya replied absentmindedly. She was
picking up all kind of fighting tools and armour and putting them down again. Brienne helped her
select the pieces that would best suit her height. Arya accepted them gratefully. She couldn’t wait for
tomorrow morning.

Brienne let her off the hook for now but would make sure Arya talked about this Jon some more in
the future.

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That night at the dinner table Arya hugged her father. “Thanks father,” she whispered her little arms
clinging to him. Ned smiled indulgently. “You welcome Arya. You can thank me by paying
attention and obeying Lady Brienne’s orders, even if she makes you repeat a move a hundred times.”

Arya’s smile only grew wider at hearing her father’s statement. “That’s exactly how Jon said he
learned to fight and Jon is the best.”

Ned returned her smile and wished she wouldn’t grow up too fast. He felt Catelyn touching his arm
and turned his attention to her. “What was that all about?” He heard her ask, the dismay apparent in
her tone.

“Arya will be given formal fight training starting tomorrow. As long as Lady Brienne of Tarth is here
she will obligate us by performing this service for us. It is how she will earn her upkeep for the time
being. I’m still looking into an official position for Loras. I hope Robb will return soon. He can
shadow my son in his duties around Winterfell.”

“How can I make Arya a fitting wife for a Lord if you train her like a warrior?”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive. Haven’t you ever heard of Prince Oberyn’s daughters? They are
some of the fiercest fighters yet their beauty and elegance is well known.”

Catelyn looked appalled at that. “You mean that Dornish Prince with his eight bastards? You dare
compare my daughter’s prospects with these bastards?!”

“Keep your voice down woman. This is no conversation for the dinner table.”

He softened his tone. “I am sorry, it is just …,” he tried again. “Never mind, perhaps you would be
willing to join me in my study after dinner? I have received some scrolls and there might be things of
interest to you in there.”

“Request for betrothals?” Catelyn’s mood brightened immediately.

“Aren’t there always? Yes amongst other things. Has Sansa told you about that new book she is
reading?” Ned thought it wise to bring up a neutral subject.

Later in his study, he sipped from his ale and waited patiently until his wife had settled herself and
arranged her frock around her to her satisfaction. He offered her a glass of wine but she refused
politely. Best she kept a clear head.

“Lord Arryn died as you already know. The King is looking for a new Hand.” Ned saw Catelyn eyes widen in interest. “I have received a scroll announcing his visit. He is coming to Winterfell. I do not have to spell out what that means.”

“Will you accept Ned? Will we live in Kingslanding?” Catelyn tried to hide her excitement but didn’t really succeed.

“I will accept but mind you, I intend to wait a few days before I give him my decision. You must promise me not to reveal anything beforehand.” His voice had taken on the now familiar authority.

“Why would you do that Ned?”

“Because I want to be in a strong position when I do not give my consent to an immediate betrothal between Prince Joffrey and Sansa. I will stall as long as I have to. If ever I am forced to give him a definite answer concerning the betrothal, it will be a refusal. Do not doubt that Catelyn.”

“Would it be so terrible to betroth them?” Catelyn tried.

“She is too young. Besides you know that Prince Joffrey will never be King. Why would you insist on this betrothal? You just have to trust me when I say there are other things in play. Things I’d rather not tell you yet. It is too dangerous with the entire royal court coming here.”

“You have worked yourself in a real bind here Ned. Do you think I like being the wife of a traitor all because of a single baby? Sometimes I hate the fact that he exists. You have lived most of your life in the shadows because of that boy.”

“Enough woman! You do not know what you are talking about. First of all, do not speak that way of my royal nephew in my presence ever again. He will be your King sooner than you know it. Furthermore, you should know that Joffrey Baratheon isn’t worthy to kiss Sansa’s feet. You will soon see for yourself what kind of person he is. That’s all I am going to say on this subject for now.”

Even though her husband was in a bad mood, Catelyn didn’t give in and defended her point of view. “Petyr? You mean Lord Baelish? Littlefinger? What has he to do in this discussion? Do not tell me woman that you have been corresponding with that man behind my back.” Ned was getting angrier with every word his wife uttered.

“He is a social climber, a leech, a conniver. If only you knew what plots we have had to thwart that were instigated by ‘your friend’ over the years. He would see us all beheaded if he could gain anything by it. Gods woman, that man is dangerous. Lord Reed has helped us escape several of his assassination attempts, most of them against me, once he even targeted Robb at a time that he was still our only heir.”

“I do not believe you. Petyr is our friend. You must be mistaken.” A bit of doubt was creeping into her voice though.

“He is no friend of mine and you know that very well. Why else would you conceal your correspondence from me during all these years? How did you send your letters? Does he send you
messengers? Are there spies in Winterfell I should know of?"

“No! I just had to leave them in a secret spot in Wintertown. Petyr had someone pick them up. I do not know who or when. Each time I went to the market I would check for a new message.” She looked really guilty now.

“I want you to go and retrieve each and every letter he has ever written to you. Do not even think to hide a single one from me. I want you to go and fetch them now.” He studied her and saw the recalcitrant look upon her face.

“Better still, I will come with you. Then you will proceed to tell me every little piece of information you have fed him. To think the spy we were looking for in Winterfell could have been you! Do you realise what you have done woman?” He had stopped every effort to reign in his temper and wasn’t sorry for intimidating her.

“Ned you are scaring me.” She pleaded openly now.

“I am scaring you? You are scaring the wits out of me! Catelyn you have no idea what that man has done over the years.” He literally dragged her out of the room.

Ned thought he had known what to expect but the amount of scrolls Catelyn presented him with defied his imagination. “Hells women did he write to you every moon during our entire marriage? There must be almost two hundred messages here. Did you send a reply each time?”

“No, I skipped sometimes. You will notice when you read his letters. He often complained he did not hear from me often enough. He also implied he wrote as often to Lysa and she always replied.”

“Can you point me to the most recent ones? I will read those first.” Ned was at a loss. He still couldn’t believe his eyes.

Catelyn complied keeping a wary eye on her husband while he read Littlefinger’s latest messages.

He asks quite a lot of you. Ned stated after he had read the five most recent ones. He threw them into her lap. “Now tell me exactly what you replied to them.”

This was her chance to show her husband she had known what she was doing and had played Petyr as much as he had played her. “I can help you out there Ned. You will see I kept my answers vague. I always kept in mind that our heads would be forfeit if I let something important slip. She went back to the cupboard and took out larger sheets. I always drafted my messages before writing the final version so as to have an immaculate version to send. You know I am a stickler for cleanliness. Well as an act of good faith, I will let you read every word I send to Petyr.”

Looking grim, Ned took possessions of these sheets and started reading. After a while he looked at her anxious face. “Thanks Catelyn, this assures me slightly. I haven’t read them all yet but I can already get some measure of things now. You did reveal just enough to keep him interested in corresponding with you, but nothing too harmful, at least not in these two I have read. A few things in there I would have preferred to keep from him but it could have been a lot worse.”

“I am sorry Ned. I will not write to him again.” She seemed a bit mollified with his initial appraisal.

“No, I think you should keep writing to him. Only we will write your messages together and try to get him to reveal his schemes. He is no friend Catelyn. You need to believe me when I tell you this. I will take all of these scrolls into my chambers and tomorrow we will reconvene. I will then systematically expose every false statement and scheme in his letters so you can start to see your Petyr for what he really is.
By the way, what did you make of the vague rumours he mentioned? The ones about the royals children including your dear Prince Joffrey being Lannister bastards?” he was curious now knowing her strong prejudice against bastards.

“Just vile rumours Ned. Petyr states as much, rumours started by enemies of the Lannisters. The Prince is such a handsome boy. Everyone knows that he can’t be some vile bastard.”

“You and your southern views! Have you ever theorised about the concept of bastards? You condemn innocent babies and still pay your respects to the parents who are the ones to commit the sin. Jon is already wiser than you are by far. He wrote to me once that they should call the fathers bastards, not the innocent babes. And by the Gods women he has the right of it. If only you would let yourself think on it.”

“Bastards are born with evil in them. They threaten trueborn children.” She parroted her beliefs.

“No wonder they lash out if you treat them so unjustifiable. You start with an innocent baby, Catelyn. Try to think for yourself for once in your life and not repeat the words of some ignorant priest. A child who has never done anything wrong in the world gets mistreated by everyone, is sometimes cast out completely and you wonder why it retaliates? Bastards, damn I really hate that term, I mean children whose parents are not married, are to be pitied anyway. They stand to inherit nothing. You should give them at least a good education. Teach them a craft so they can earn their own living later, not unlike second sons. But I am getting off topic. What if the rumours were true? What if I accept a betrothal between Sansa and Prince Joffrey and he turns out to be a bastard?”

“Gods forbid Ned, you are right to stall as long as possible.” Catelyn’s world was turned upside down by this notion. The golden Crown Prince could not possibly be an evil bastard? Surely these were just rumours?

Ned sighed. “I am going to leave you for now Catelyn. I need plenty of time to study all this. Help me carry them to my room if you will.” He shook his head. It would be a long night for him.

Ned was astounded at the poison contained in Littlefinger’s subtle letters. He began to understand some reactions of his wife better. Her stubborn views on some topics, the silent blame game she sometimes had going with him. The man had poisoned their marriage from afar. And not only that, he had subtly let it be known he would always be there for her if ever something happened to her husband, even going so far as suggesting marriage. No wonder Baelish had been plotting his death. The more he read, the angrier he got. He would have to talk to someone about this but to whom? His brother was still incomunicado beyond the Wall. Howard Reed was a possibility but with the King’s imminent visit Ned could not leave. Perhaps Lord Reed would want to come here? Unlikely but he could always ask. He envied Jon his circle of advisers. Ned had only one person left here in Winterfell he trusted with his life, someone wise and neutral enough to give a valued opinion. He would go and speak to Maester Luwin. If necessary he would postpone the talk with his wife.

But first he would have to write a letter to the Vale. He needed Lord Royce’s assistance to thwart another of Littlefinger’s schemes. Somehow Baelish’s letters to his wife had given him an insight in the man’s conniving mind. He wouldn’t tell Catelyn this, but a welcome side effect of her irresponsible behaviour was that they had the opportunity to prevent losing the support of an entire Kingdom to their cause, one they had considered to be firmly on board.

He should make an effort to get his marriage back on track. He didn’t want to grant Petyr even this small victory. Catelyn was his wife. He would ask the Maester to start giving her moon tea. It had
been too long time since he last bedded his wife. Good sex had always been an easy way to persuade her to his side. He realised he was not entirely blameless. Petyr Baelish would never have had such an influence on Catelyn if he had paid her more attention.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter several decisions will need to be made.
Across the Narrow Sea, Daenerys has to deal with more than one suitor.
Decisions

Chapter Summary

A tentative alliance is struck and several decisions are made.
Across the Narrow Sea, Daenerys has to deal with more than one suitor.

Chapter Notes

I do not like Alliser Thorne so he doesn’t exist in my universe and the Master at Arms at the Wall is someone else.

One of the reasons why I wrote this fanfic is that I believe GRRM created an intriguing world but watching the show I concluded that they missed several lost opportunities, the small impact of the direwolves being one of them.
Several of my readers are dismayed by the role Daenerys plays in Season 8 of the show and are concerned for my Jon ending up with her in this fanfic.
I want you all to keep in mind that this story takes place in an alternate universe and that allows me to play around with the characters as much as I like. The only rules I follow are my own rules.

My version of Jon is totally different from the Jon in the show. At seventeen he is bossing everyone around and embracing the fact that his destiny is to become a benevolent King. My version of Daenerys has lived a sheltered life and is the opposite of the power hungry must be queen you see in the series.
Another heads up: Khal Drogo appears on the scene. He is also OOC but do not make the mistake to think he is not smart. His broken speech may make it appear so, but the fact that he is the only Dothraki who made the effort to learn to communicate in a strange language is already a sign of his intelligence.

I’ll stop my rambling here and let you read the chapter. I hope the plot will stay intriguing enough to keep you all interested, even those of you who would prefer other pairings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter text:

Edric, Robb and Sam had joined Jon on the bridge. They were watching the Ironborn ship. A small boat had been lowered into the water with three people on board. They had brought the white flag along. Jon used the spyglass he had loaned from the chief mate.

“It is Yara Greyjoy!” He exclaimed.

“The Ironborn you saved from the pirates?” Robb asked. “What would she want with us?”

“Isn’t it obvious,” Sam addressed Robb. “The enemy of your enemy is your friend. Jon has
 successfully attacked Euron Greyjoy. That makes him her natural ally. She will be here to seek his aid. The fact that she survived means she is on the run.”

“The enemy of the enemy is your friend? What a strange phrase.” Robb repeated Sam’s words with a frown on his face.

“I read it in a very old book. It makes sense if you think on it.” Sam replied a sheepish smile on his face.

“Let us join the others on deck. Even Ser Gerold will agree that Yara Greyjoy and two lackeys pose no real threat to me.” Jon was already making his way down.

“My lady,” Jon greeted her as took her hand to help her on board.

She accepted his hand with a tense nod of her head.

“Your weapons please?” Ser Gerold would not take any risks.

“I do not carry any.” Yara’s answer was abrupt. Then she turned around and ordered the two men to row back to her ship. “Come and get me when you receive my signal,” she ordered them and then faced Jon and his entourage.

“See, I come alone and in peace. I trust you will offer me guest rights and not chain me, my Lord?” She addressed her question to Jon, not Ser Gerold.

“Of course, this way please.” He showed her to the cabin where they took their meals.

Jon watched her partake of some bread and salt and ate a small piece as well. He saw her relax before his eyes.

He signalled Davos and Ser Gerold to take a seat at the small table. A significant look at Sam resulted in his friend ushering everybody out. They went willingly confident they would get a full briefing afterwards.

Robb however stayed behind. “I wish to represent the Warden of the North in this negotiation.”

His commanding tone was answered by a small smile from Jon. “Pull up a chair then.”

At Yara Greyjoy’s questioning look he added for her sake. “My Lady, may I present to you Lord Robb of house Stark, son of Eddard Stark, heir to Winterfell and future Warden of the North. I trust you still remember Davos of house Seaworth and Ser Gerold?”

Yara nodded, her gaze lingering on Robb. So this was the foster brother Theon had written about all these years. At first her brother’s letters had described a disgustingly endearingly relationship with the heir but lately not so much anymore. Several moons ago he had written to her that the Starks had gotten complacent and he was finally able to sneak messages to her when he stayed in Wintertown. Finally she received unbiased accounts that weren’t read by the Starks before he was allowed to send them to his family. He stressed that he hated the Starks and that they would pay for his captivity sometime in the future. It appeared her brother had stayed an Ironborn in exile.

Yara made an effort to refocus on the situation at hand and continued to stare at Lord Celtigar. She guessed he was the dragon rider if the stories were to be believed. At least that way she could explain why a young boy was in charge of this strange mix of characters.

Jon answered her stare with one of his own. He decided not to waste any more time and opened the talks. In a determined voice he fired his first question at her. “How did you know where to find us?”
“Everyone who has ears heard Euron Greyjoy’s frustrated outburst when he returned to Pyke with less than half of his men.”

“So we know for a fact he survived the attack.” Ser Gerold stated the obvious. “We assume your father was deposed when Euron Greyjoy first landed on Pyke?”

“Uncle Euron killed him. The bastard didn’t even have the courtesy to offer him an honourable death. I was not at Pyke at the time so I only heard of it from Ironborn at Pyke still loyal to me. I am not entirely sure whether I got a faithful report or an exaggerated account of their final confrontation. They all describe how Euron Greyjoy acted like a madman and how with a single nonchalant gesture he pushed my father of the bridge separating the two towers of Pyke, all the while laughing as a madman. The told me my father’s head got crushed against the foundations of his home before disappearing beneath the turbulent waters. His body was never found.”

Yara’s voice betrayed no emotions. She also waved away any attempts at sympathetic remarks Jon and Davos started to make. Without further ado she got back to the business at hand.

“Ever since his defeat at your hands, my dearest uncle makes sure to monitor your movements. I still have loyal men living on Pyke. One of the reasons I came here was to warn you.”

“Your warning has no value. We already know we made an enemy who is not honourable and will ambush his prey after sundown. Did you not hear about that from your informants as well?” Jon undermined her negotiating position.

“We could help each other.” She ventured neither admitting nor denying that she knew of the ambush.

“How convenient for you,” Davos intervened. “And what could you possibly offer us? If you have reliable spies, then you know we defeated his superior force and suffered not a single casualty on our side.”

“You can’t be everywhere at once. I could tell you where he plans to hit next,” she insisted. “Or perhaps what countermeasures he is devising.”

“And lead us into a trap?” Ser Gerold decided to voice his doubts.

“Why would I do that? Actually how would I do that?” She focused on Jon once more. “I figured out how you set that pirate ship on fire from afar.”

“Then you know we do not really need any help.” Davos objected trying to divert her attention from Jon’s role during the attack.

Jon studied her. “Is there some way you could prove your claim that you are on our side?” He realised she was right about not being able to be everywhere at once with his dragons. However admitting that would not only undermine Davos but also weaken their position in this negotiation.

“You control my brother’s fate and you know I want him by my side.” Yara tried.

“Not good enough” Jon countered and remembered uneasily that they didn’t know where Theon was at the moment. For all he knew the Kraken was halfway to Pyke running straight into his uncle’s arms. Yara wouldn’t be pleased to hear her brother could well be about to be slaughtered by Euron Greyjoy. He threw a warning look at Robb. He hoped Robb would not mention that Theon had escaped.

“King Robert controls Theon Greyjoy’s fate.” Robb spoke up for the first time. “The Starks are only obeying royal orders.”
“As if a friend of a dragon is a true friend of Robert Baratheon.” Yara sneered. She paused to consider her options. “I could,” she faltered then resumed, “I could offer myself up as a hostage.”

“Would your men still be loyal to you if you did that? Could we still trust the intelligence they would bring you? As far as I know the ways of your people, if they do not believe you strong enough to lead them, they will look for someone else to follow. In spite of your uncle’s recent setback, he is probably the only other candidate they can turn to if you are our captive. You are of no value to us then.”

“You forget my brother Theon. The Ironborn could rally behind him. He would vouch for me.”

“Now you are grasping at straws. Your brother is not a free man and he has not lived on Pyke for many years. Will they still see him as a true Ironborn?” Jon’s hopes of forging a fruitful alliance were dwindling. “Aside from endangering our relationship with the royal family by releasing him, the chances of Theon Greyjoy and me agreeing on anything are rather slim.”

Ser Gerold intervened. “We are talking in circles here. I have yet to hear a single reason why we should become allies.”

“Is there any useful information on Euron Greyjoy you can give us right now? Anything that is substantial enough to prove you can be trusted?” Davos calm tone was meant to counteract the downwards spiral the conversation was making.

“You mean spill it all without any promises on your end?” It appeared Yara was getting desperate. “What do you really stand to lose? We already helped you by weakening Euron Greyjoy’s position. Technically you owe us this.” Jon relished having the stronger negotiating position.

“He is looking at the South right now. He is searching for rich lands that are not so heavily defended.” She admitted with apparent reluctance. “I heard him speak of the Reach and Oldtown.”

“I thought you came to warn us. Which is it? Will he sail south or will he come for us?” Ser Gerold didn’t really see the point in continuing this interrogation.

“Even if he takes part of his fleet south now, he has a vendetta against you Lord Celtigar. He will keep tracking your movements and strike when he believes he has found a weak spot. But I admit he will be more careful and you probably have bought yourself some time before he tries anything again.”

Jon looked at his camp a question in his eyes. Davos shrugged his shoulders but cleared his voice and spoke up. “My Lady, will you step outside for a bit? We want to discuss this amongst ourselves. We won’t take long I assure you.”

Jon couldn’t stop himself from taunting her and immediately added to Davos’ request. “Oh, do be careful not to step on my direwolf who is guarding the door from the outside. I believe he doesn’t like Krakens all that much.”

If Jon expected Yara Greyjoy to be upset by this dismissal and his jibe, he could not have been more mistaken. Yara was looking visibly relieved and did not hesitate to leave the cabin.

A bit later, Jon joined her on deck and called Ghost to him. He escorted her to the port side. Together they watched the crew on the deck of her ship attend to their duties. “You seem to run a tight ship.” Jon complimented her.
Yara shifted her position a little keeping a wary eye on the big wolf that hadn’t left her side and was even now worming himself between the two of them.

“Ghost,” Jon’s commanding tone had immediate effect. The direwolf retreated and curled himself in a peaceful position at Jon’s feet. Jon petted his head affectionately.

Yara tried to keep her composure at this blatant exhibition of power from the young Lord. She just threw a questioning look at him.

Jon decided to comply. “We propose to keep in contact as tentative allies. If your help proves substantial we will consider supporting you to take back control of the Iron Islands. No formal promise yet, just a declaration of intent, one with great potential on your side if you deliver on your promise. You can signal your ship now to pick you up.” His tone clearly indicated that negotiations were over. This was a take it or leave it deal.

“I’ll take it.” Again there was no hesitation on her part.

Jon realised coming to them had been a desperate move on her part, some sort of last option with bad odds. He looked thoughtful when she asked. “How do you propose we keep in contact, Lord Celtigar?”

He noticed she had taken out a small mirror and used the reflection of the sunlight to signal her crew. Jon waited patiently until she had finished. He made a mental note of this useful trick.

“While we wait we can agree on some code words to disguise the true meaning of our messages. If your spies on Pyke are as reliable as you claim they are, they can tell you where to send them. If one of your messages requires an answer from our side, just use the code to tell us where to send it.”

“You will not tell me what your plans are? I cannot fathom what you intend to achieve sailing this far north with two large fire breathing dragons?” Yara was curious. If only she could control those fearsome animals the way he seemingly could, she would have conquered half of Westeros by now.

“All in good time. Let us first wait and see how this alliance will evolve.” Jon stated his face staying neutral.

When Yara was safely on board of her own ship, Jon sought out Sam and Davos. He ordered for a message to be prepared to Lord Tyrell. It contained the warning of a possible imminent Ironborn attack on the Reach. The message further detailed that they counted on Lord Tyrell as the Lord Paramount of the Reach to alert Old Town, the Arbor, the Shield Isles an any other likely target along the coast and the Mander River. Jon urged Sam to formulate a message to his father, Lord Tarly as well. Davos could sign it, but his family needed to be warned.

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Slowly the little harbour of Sea Dragon Point came into view.

This time it was Sandor Clegane who was standing next to Jon at the bow watching the ship approach the shore.

“What are we going to do in this godsforsaken place? I can almost smell that ice wall from here.” he muttered wringing his cold hands together.

‘Not a single f-word’, Jon didn’t voice that thought but was amused. ‘Perhaps years of talking with polite company would slowly change his speech patterns?’
A loud curse interrupted his musings. ‘Or perhaps not.’ He turned to Sandor.
“Whatever is the matter Sandor?“

“I just bumped my knee against this fucking crate trying to regain my balance after that stupid shift in
direction.” He looked at Jon and narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t answer my question boy. What
stupid shit are we doing in this cold and godsforsaken place?”

“I hope to receive some messages. Our allies knew this was the next point they could reach us.”

“Okay, so don’t tell me, I can live with that but do not lie to me boy.”

“I’m not.” Jon tried.

“But you’re not telling either.” Sandor didn’t relent.

“Sandor,” Jon started.

Sandor held up his hand. “In future, just say straight to my ugly face you won’t or can’t tell anything
at the first time of asking. Then I can respect you boy. You know full well I resent cunts that talk but
say nothing.”

Jon smiled. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind. I do expect some messages though.”

“Worried about your uncle boy?” Sandor tried a different tactic.

Jon rolled his eyes at the third mention of the word boy in this short conversation but then his face
darkened. “Yeah, it is the longest I have gone without a sign of life from him. I’m very worried.”

“It will all be set to rights. That’s why we’re fucking here anyway.” Sandor stated matter of fact
enjoying the look of shock on Jon’s face. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell if you won’t.” He grinned to
reassure Jon and sauntered off when he saw Robb approach, Greywind at his heels.

Jon and Robb had spent more than two moons together. Their bond had been tested but Jon knew
with absolute certainty that Robb had accepted his new reality and was one hundred percent on
board now. He suspected Robb would have a stern talk with his father though.
He had watched how Robb had made good use of this journey. After seeing Jon interrogate the
garrison commander and assess the threats during their first stop at the Stony Shore, his cousin had
started to do the same at all the other settlements they had visited next. He now had a full report
prepared for his father and had told Jon he was satisfied to know more about the situation in the
Kingdom he was destined to rule one day.
Travelling with Jon had made him realise that being heir to the North meant taking responsibility and
not just giving some random orders from far away. He had decided he would ask his father to let him
take an active part in seeing to the welfare of the people of the North.

“Hi,” Robb said when he reached Jon. “Why are you hiding out here?”

“I’m standing in plain view Robb. I particularly enjoy watching a ship enter port and anticipate the
joy I will feel when my feet can touch dry land once more.”

“Not really a sailor?”

“Nope, but I realise it can be a convenient means of travelling. I fear you’ve come to tell me you’ll be
leaving us soon?” Jon looked at the serious face of his cousin.

“Only if I can’t convince you to travel to Winterfell with me.” Robb attempted one last time.
“I can’t Robb, not yet, I’ve told you my reasons.”

“Yeah, a guy can try though. I hate that we need to part. I hate it even more that I do not know when we will see each other again. “

“I have a feeling it won’t be long before that happens Robb.” He sighed and changed the subject. “I worry about the content of the messages that await us. I know it is unrealistic to presume Varys has been able to deflect every rumour of dragons flying around Westeros. I’m anxious to know which version of the story is circulating over there. A lot of my plans will depend on that.”

Robb studied him. “It may still be too early to evaluate whether the rumours have done some damage.” His jaw shifted slightly. “I know the content of at least one message already.” He mimicked his mother’s tone. “Robb please hurry home, love mom.”

“Let’s pray there is one from uncle Benjen.” Jon stared in the distance, his eyes not really taking anything in. Both boys sighed simultaneously.

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Plenty of messages had indeed arrived, none from uncle Benjen, but one from uncle Aemon. Plenty of scrolls from their allies and as expected a message marked urgent from Winterfell addressed to Robb.

The message from the Wall was the first one Jon opened. It contained no new information of uncle Benjen. His mission north of the Wall was taking longer than expected Maester Aemon wrote. Both boys were disheartened. The rest of the letter contained a request to search for something called obsidian but Jon put it aside for now and was about to ask Robb to read the urgent message from Winterfell at once when he noticed his cousin had already opened the message from his father.

Robb summarised the content aloud to Jon as he read. As expected he was called home immediately. The King had been spotted crossing the border into the North. The messages detailed the route the royal caravan was taking. Uncle Ned wrote he had taken precautions to lead them past Moat Cailin with a guide and had given instructions to the castellan to keep the smallfolk hidden while the caravan passed. The guide would take the abandoned old road where some ruins could still be seen so as not to raise too many questions. The improvements at Winterfell alone would be more than enough to make the Lannisters suspicious.

Robb put the letter down and described the improvements his father had made at Winterfell after Jon’s visit.

“A second fortified wall has been built that encompasses a large area around the original one that still serves as a second layer of protection to the castle. The new fortifications contain an impressive gatehouse flanked by two slightly protruding watchtowers built at just the right angle to provide additional protection. The new inner courtyard created between the new and the original wall houses several workshops and large stables. To the south the gap between the two walls widens significantly to make room for extensive glass houses.”

He resumed his perusing of his father’s letter. “He also writes about Arya’s safe return. Oh, she is taking official fighting lessons with Lady Brienne of Tarth now. I also must thank you on father’s behalf for the beautiful sword you have given Arya. There should be a small thank you note from her addressed to you personally included in here.”
Rob rolled out the entire scroll and a small piece fell from it. “That must be it.” He handed it to Jon who tucked it away to read it later. He gestured Robb to continue.

Father mentions that Loras Tyrell is making himself useful and he believes him to be an upstanding boy. He suspects Sansa to have a little crush on him but nothing serious. The boy ignores her so he doesn’t worry.” Robb falters. “Oh I should have kept that part to myself.” A repentant smile flashed over his face before he frowned. “Do not let on you are aware of this.”

“Listen to this shocking titbit.” Robb’s voice betrayed his surprise. “The black sheep Theon has returned to Winterfell of his own volition. He claims he had just left on a short adventure with friends and didn’t realise his absence would cause such a stir. Father doesn’t know what to make of that but keeps a guard on him at all times now. He is relieved this situation has been resolved before King Robert’s arrival.”

Robb read on in silence for a bit. Then he put the letter down.

“The rest are just some insignificant internal family matters except for one thing. It appears Domesic Bolton, Roose Bolton’s eldest son and heir has lodged a formal complaint against his bastard half-brother Ramsay Snow. Apparently this Ramsay Snow has committed hideous crimes against the smallfolk. Domesic Bolton begs my father to deal with this because Roose Bolton doesn’t consider it serious enough and just laughs stating the boy is going through a phase. Domesic Bolton petitions the Warden of the North to use his authority over his father. Lord Stark should order his bannerman to protect the wellbeing of the smallfolk living in and around the Dreadfort.”

“Does your father write how he intends to deal with this matter?” Jon was appalled by what he just heard.

“My father explains his options are limited because he cannot travel to the Dreadfort. He is stuck at Winterfell due to the imminent royal visit. He has written a stern letter to Lord Roose Bolton. He will monitor the situation and if necessary will ask the Greatjon or Lord Karstark to pay Roose Bolton a visit. Under no circumstance am I allowed to travel there. My protection detail is too small and the Boltons could well keep me hostage until he allows the betrothal of Sansa to his heir. He stresses once more he needs me at Winterfell and wants me to arrive as soon as possible.”

Robb rolled up the scroll and tucked it away.

“I guess that means I will arrange for my journey home. I’ll alert my houseguard so they can pack their things and see to it that our horses are among the first to disembark.” He looked at Jon with a reluctant expression. “And all of this because of a Usurper coming north. I wished you could come along and take the Baratheon King hostage at Winterfell.”

“I know,” Robb relented when he saw Jon’s exasperated expression. “I do know you told me several times why this is not a good idea. A man can dream can’t he? Can I ask Edric to accompany me to Winterfell, and perhaps Gendry and Sam also?”

Jon looked thoughtful. His first reaction was to deny Robb’s request instantly but was he allowed to dictate all their lives just like that?

“You could ask Edric what he prefers to do, I reckon.” He hesitated. “Sam and Gendry on the other hand, I’d rather you didn’t approach them. I need them with me for one and you would put them in an awkward position. Sam is probably going to leave for Oldtown soon anyway. I am sorry Robb.”

“I understand Jon. It was just an idea. I finally found company my own age I can stand to be around. You do realise I have to go back and live with Theon at Winterfell once more?”

“You have plenty of siblings Robb. If we play the pity game, I win. Do not forget Loras is at Winterfell too, probably counting the days until you show up. You know your siblings enjoy his company at Winterfell. Hells, we only knew him for a bit over a sennight before we had to part ways
in the Riverlands but that was long enough to see he could fit right into our little circle.

“Well if I may call dibs on Edric and Loras, you can have Sam and Gendry.” He joked. At Jon’s serious expression he stopped his teasing. “Jon, I didn’t mean it that way. I’ll just issue an open invitation to Winterfell to Edric whenever he feels like it, nothing more and nothing less.”

A tentative smile ghosted over Jon’s face. “Now if you will excuse me, I really need to scan the other messages from our allies and have a quick talk with Davos. If there is anything of interest in them I will tell you later when I give you the letters I have prepared for Arya and uncle Ned. I am certain I will need to add a few things to uncle Ned’s letter so let me attend to that first. That way I can make sure I’m finished with the most urgent things long before you are set to leave. I also have to fetch the small gifts I prepared for your family. I wouldn’t want Sansa, Bran or Rickon to think I only like you and Arya.”

He saw Robb’s quizzical look and with a teasing smile on his face he continued. “Don’t worry, we’ll make time to say a proper goodbye and share at least one more meal and then you can have your present. No need to be jealous, I have one for you as well.”

Robb nudged his shoulder. Jon patted his cousin’s back a few times in return and both boys hurried to finish their tasks so they could still spend some time together later.

One last time the five boys enjoyed a joint meal. They made a pact to always be friends and to do their utmost to keep contact. If anyone of them ever needed anything, he had four loyal friends to call upon. Gendry had been touched to be included in this circle. He had slowly but surely become at ease in this little group even though he had been subjected to relentless teasing when he had asked Robb whether there was any news of Arya in his message from Winterfell. He had turned red when he defended himself by saying he just wanted to know if she had arrived home safely.

After elaborate thanks to Jon, Robb had turned to Gendry and praised him as well when he finally received his gift just moments before they were about to leave. Somehow Gendry had found the time at the Driftmark to execute an additional order from Jon. He had made a beautiful dagger for Robb. The handle ended in the same miniature direwolf’s head as the pommel of Arya’s new sword, only the colour of the eyes was different. On his dagger they were yellow.

Much to Jon and Ser Arthur’s surprise, Edric had agreed to accompany Robb to Winterfell for a short visit. Edric had apologised to Jon but explained that the opportunity to meet the fat King Robert and his entourage had been the compelling factor.

When Robb and Edric set off, the three that stayed behind together with Ghost had climbed a little rise and had waved until the small caravan taking the heir back to Winterfell was no longer visible. Ghost had whined quietly needing comfort from Jon. Jon surmised his wolf would miss Greywind just as much as he would miss Robb.

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Walking back to the tavern, Jon made sure to talk to Sam. “Would you be willing to help me with something Sam?” Jon asked.

“You know I will,” Sam simply replied. “Ask away.”
“Come to my room and I’ll let you read the letter I got from Maester Aemon. He describes exactly what I need you to do.” Jon opened the door of the tavern and let Sam pass through it watching the boy intently.

“Have you noticed lately that your clothes are getting somewhat too big for you?” Jon remarked. “You should ask the maid here to help you adjust them a bit. You’re not sick, are you Sam? Do you know why you have been losing weight?”

“Well I am training more than I used to and I do not get desert when we travel.” Sam tried to joke. “I don’t mind though, I’ve never felt better and do not tire so easily. You need not worry about me.”

The boys waved at Gendry who had told them he would retire to his room. Davos had found him a book with drawings of all kinds of armour, bucklers and helmets and he wanted to look at it some more.

“Glad to hear it.” Jon reacted to Sam’s statement. They had entered Jon’s room. “Let me find this letter first.”

“You get a lot of messages Jon.” Sam studied the content of his bed. “Are these all new ones? I hope you have a filing system.”

“ Mostly new ones. Things are starting to move fast and we need to communicate a lot. Here, I found it. I scribbled the decoded lines between the original ones.” Jon handed him the letter.

“Obsidian? Volcanic glass? I will hit the books as soon as I fetch them from the ship. I will need to look for place where there used to be an active volcano. I bet there will be lots of volcanic glass on Old Valyria, but don’t worry, I’ll do my best to find a more accessible location.” He looked at Jon. “Anything else you want me to do?”

“Actually yes, I would like you to go to the citadel and forge your chain. I need a Maester. The Wall will also need a Maester to replace my uncle Aemon. However I would vastly prefer you to consider entering my services. Go to the citadel, be my ears and eyes there and come back to my side once you have forged your chain. The Wall is not a place anyone would volunteer to be at right now. It is the most dangerous place of Westeros.”

Jon paused and looked at Sam a serious look in his eyes. “I know it will take you a while to come back but keep in mind Dragonstone and the Driftmark are not that distant from Oldtown. I will find reasons to meet and I will write you constantly.”

“But my father,” Sam stammered.

“What would you do if you didn’t have to deal with your father? What would you chose if it was just you deciding your own fate without any outside pressure.”

“But that is not the case Jon.”

“Sam, I have some very powerful people behind me. If all goes as planned I will be powerful in my own right. You need not face your father. Lord Eddard Stark can write to him that you are studying at the citadel on the orders of the Warden of the North. He can formulate it in such a way that your father will presume you are destined to become a Maester at the Wall even if he doesn’t write it explicitly. This will buy you even more time to decide whether you really want to relinquish your right to Horn Hill. If you want it to go to your brother, I can draft a decree that he becomes the heir no matter whether you join the Night’s Watch or become one of my most trusted advisers. If you want your birthright and become the next Lord of Horn Hill, I can make that happen as well. You can choose whatever you want and we will deal with your father. We can make sure you never need
to speak to him again Sam.” Jon looked him in the eyes. “Promise me you will make a decision factoring out your father’s wishes and solely considering your own.”

Sam took a deep breath. “If I take my father out of the equation, my decision is an easy one. I choose you Jon. If you or Lord Stark can really convince my father, I relinquish my rights to Horn Hill. I will serve you in any way you deem fit.”

Jon hugged Sam. You will make an excellent Grand Maester Sam.” He asserted.

“Grand Maester?”

“In time and only if I get to be King. You have the potential Sam. Nobody understands and retains knowledge as you do.” Jon smiled at Sam’s shocked expression.

“Grand Maester.” This time the words were uttered with reverence. “I want to see my father’s face if ever that happens and he learns of it. It will be priceless.”

“You will outrank him.” Jon shared his hypothetical triumph.

“So how do we go about this?” Sam asked.

“I’ll write to Lord Stark today Sam. You have until this evening to change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.” Jon looked relieved. “Could you find Davos Seaworth? I still need to go through all these messages with him. And thank you Sam. I really appreciate your decision. We will make the best team Westeros has ever seen. I hope it will not take you too long to forge your chain. I warn you though, I won’t let you leave for Oldtown before you teach me an adequate filing system to arrange my scrolls.” Jon smiled.

Sam returned his smile and left the room to find Davos.

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Jon and Davos secluded themselves in Jon’s room and screened all the messages. The most important development was that Varys confirmed Stannis Baratheon had left Dragonstone. He and his household had moved to Storm’s End. The King had not yet decreed who was to take possession of Dragonstone. Apparently he hesitated to give temporary custody to Lord Velaryon and let him install a castellan for the time being. The King was still debating which noble house he needed to buy a favour of by granting them Dragonstone.

Then there was the letter from Princess Daenerys informing him of her newly arrived suitor Prince Quentyn Martell. The next one was from Prince Oberyn who warned him once more about a possible conspiracy between Freys, Ironborns and Boltons and informed them he was sailing from Seagard to the Wall with his daughter Nymeria. He also wrote of Prince Doran’s one sided action to send his heir to Essos to betroth himself to Daenerys Targaryen. Although the warning came too late, Jon was sure Prince Oberyn had been ignorant before.

A knock on the door interrupted them. Ser Oswell entered a tiny scroll in his hand. “An urgent message from Maester Aemon, my Prince.”
“Thank you Ser Oswell.” Jon’s tone clearly implied he would read this as soon as Ser Oswell had left the room.

This short message complicated matters. Davos and Jon discussed at length how to juggle all the issues at hand. The decision made, Jon wrote various messages and dictated some to Davos as well. When most of it was finished, he sent Davos to fetch Sandor Clegane. The three of them would visit his dragons. Afterwards, Davos would have the difficult task to relay Jon’s instruction to the rest of their group. They would not be best pleased to say the least.

A bit later Jon waved at Ser Gerold who watched his Prince leave with Davos and Sandor Clegane. Each of them carried a bag with some provisions. Nothing out of the ordinary if he wanted to stay out all night with the dragons.

Jon and Davos were busy discussing some last minute details when Sandor took two big steps to draw level with them. “What's up? Why did you ask for me to come along when you know I do not like to spend an entire night close to big fire breathing creatures. And what the hell are you two whispering about?”

“I’m sorry Sandor. I’ll tell you when we get there. We’re almost there anyway.” Jon shifted the bag he was carrying to his other shoulder.

“You plan to stall me so I can get no word to the others to try and stop your dumb plan? You think I’m stupid boy? You think you can play me?” The three of them had stopped walking.

“No, I do not think that. I reckoned you were probably the only one who would understand and let me go. That’s why I asked you to guard me tonight. I made sure you will not have to face Ser Gerold’s wrath. I have a written statement prepared for him. Besides Davos will have other instructions that will demand all his attention. He will have no time to take it out on you.” Jon reassured his friend.

“I ain’t afraid of a fucking scolding. I only want you to swear to me you will do everything you can to come back alive. No hairbrained schemes, you hear.”

“I hear you Sandor, loud and clear. But I have to do this. Maester Aemon forwarded me this small note of uncle Benjen. Here, read it yourself.” Jon handed Sandor a small scroll.

Maester Aemon, We have walked into a trap north west of the Fist of the First Men. The dead surround us. We are currently dug in and can defend our position for a few days still. Without outside help we won’t last a sennight. Only send help if you deem fit. Benjen Stark

“What did Maester Aemon advise?” Sandor asked his eyes still fixed on the small message trying to find some hidden meaning.

“The fact he forwarded this to me says it all. He just writes what I deem fit, he will deem fit.” Jon explained. “The Night’s Watch can never reach them in time. Maester Aemon warns me chances are the enemy keeps them alive to lure reinforcements. The more souls, the more victims they can enrol in their army of wights. I have to go Sandor. I am their only hope. We know that this enemy can be destroyed by fire. You have witnessed how powerful my dragons are. I can help. Hells, I am the only hope they still have at survival.”

“What are you waiting for then, kid? I would come along if I could but I guess I will have to sit this
“You could help me with something else. Support Davos. Escort him back as soon as I have flown off. But most of all stand by him if Ser Gerold doesn’t agree immediately with the orders Davos will give him on my behalf. Promise me that.”

“I’ll do what I can boy. Now where are those fire-hazard pets of yours? Do you need any of these provisions?” Sandor took the bag from his shoulder to show what he meant.

“Actually he does. He intends to secure them on Rhaegal’s back.” Davos’ voice betrayed his doubts about the feasibility of such a thing.

“Well I will not be helping him with that. And I reckon you will not either. Gods, they have gotten even bigger since last I saw them.” Sandor exclaimed when he spotted the dragons at the opposite side of the clearing they had just entered. He put the bag he was carrying on the ground. “That’s as far as I am going boy. Better say goodbye to me here.” he said uncomfortably.

“Thanks for everything Sandor. I promise to be back soon.” Jon said awkwardly not knowing if a more tactile gesture would be welcomed by the large man.

The dragons sensing Jon’s mood met him halfway in the middle of the clearing. Jon petted them and then leaned against Rhaegal, silently communicating with him in images. Then he addressed Viserion. “I need your help once more. One of my kin is in trouble. Will you follow your brother?” Viserion tilted his big head so his right eye could stare into Jon’s. Jon felt a strong wave of empathy coming from the dragon.

“I just need to fix something on your back Rhaegal. Will you let me try?” Rhaegal lowered his wing, eyeing the three bags suspiciously.

There was no easy way to attach the bags to Rhaegal’s back. Jon decided on another tactic. He attached the strings of two bags and placed them where he would sit, each bag dangling on a flank keeping the other in balance. Jon’s own weight would have to keep them in place during the flight. The third bag would stay behind. Jon couldn’t attach much weight to his body and maintaining his equilibrium during the flight. He would need his agility to ensure he did not fall off if the dragon had to change course abruptly. He waved goodbye to the two loyal men standing at the edge of the clearing and mounted Rhaegal. Both dragons immediately took to the air.

Davos kept gazing at the sky until Jon could no longer be seen. “What an amazing sight. At the speed he is travelling it won’t take him long to reach Castle black. Let’s head back. We will need to start making plans. Jon intends to invade Dragonstone.” Davos picked up the bag Jon had left behind and handed it to Sandor Clegane.

“About fucking time if you ask me. I have been waiting for this ever since he told me he plans to fight for the Iron Throne.” Sandor threw the bag over his shoulder and started to walk in the direction of the tavern.

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“You two just let him fly off?” Ser Gerold exclaimed a bit later in their small meeting room.

“He gave us an order. We had no choice. Do you think you could have stopped him?” Davos
countered Ser Gerold’s question with one of his own.

“Do you think the dragons would have allowed you to stop him, is the better question here Davos.” Sandor baited Ser Gerold.

“The Prince and I discussed everything this afternoon. He promised he would be back in a few days. He also devised a strategy to deal with some new developments. He asked us to make the necessary preparations and send out messages in the meantime. He has assigned us many tasks. We will hardly have time to worry about him.” Davos checked his audience. Only Ser Gerold had a frown on his face. The others seemed to accept their Prince’s decision. “But first let me explain why he left for the Wall.”

After Davos and Sandor had finished their explanation Ser Barristan intervened seeing Ser Gerold still needed to be placated. “Our Prince had no choice, Ser Gerold. He would never have been able to live with himself. Put yourself in his shoes. The uncle he has looked up to as a father all these years is in mortal danger. Add to that the fact that he has these two powerful dragons and has a very good chance to save the man’s life. How could you even expect him not to try and help? You heard Sandor and Davos. The Prince has vowed solemnly to take every precaution and has ensured them he will come back alive. He will not take unnecessary risks.”

“It is out of our hands now anyway, Ser Gerold. Better use your energy to carry out the instructions he left behind.” Ser Oswell spoke up for Jon as well.

“This is the first time in seventeen years none of us is around to protect him. Excuse me if I have trouble accepting this. Not only are we not there to protect him, he is rushing headlong into a dangerous situation toward an unknown enemy, without threat assessment or battleplan.”

“I respectfully disagree, Ser Gerold.” Ser Arthur had seen this coming and was ready to defend his Prince. “There is a firm battleplan in place. He has taken two powerful weapons. We know the weakness of this enemy is fire. Jon’s plan is so simple he did not need to discuss strategies first. Trust him Ser Gerold. You surely noticed the way he handled himself when he took on those twenty ships. He adhered to the plan of Davos, did not overreact. He deliberated and reacted wisely to the changed circumstances. You do remember he retreated before all ships were destroyed as soon as he saw the archers grasp for their bows?”

“What’s done is done.” Davos tried once more. “Let’s focus on a new development. Jon wants to invade Dragonstone. You will need to hear how he intends to do it.”

Absolute silence. Then Sandor interfered. “Come on. It’s about fucking time we moved forward with the conquer all of Westeros plan. Admit it. “

“Varys sent word that Stannis Baratheon has left for Storm’s End and has taken his household with him. King Robert is still undecided on whom to gift Dragonstone to. He isn’t leaning towards our proposition of installing a castellan under the supervision of Lord Velaryon. He is making a list of nobles he wants to placate and will probably grant it to one of them. We have a window of opportunity here. We must act and claim the island now.” Davos saw several heads nod their assent at his impassioned speech.

“What does our Prince propose?” Ser Barristan was curious.

“He asks us to prepare everything for departure so we can leave immediately upon his return. We need to send word to the Driftmark. He wants at least forty ships to be fully staffed and ready to set out. One ship is to make its way there as soon as possible under the cover of a trade mission. The crew of that ship must consist mostly of people of Valyrian descent. Perhaps even crewmembers we
recruited from Dragonstone in the first place. They will mingle among the smallfolk and start rumours of a Targaryen Prince returning home. Jon is sure by the time we land most of them will flock to our side. The ship’s crew will also infiltrate the castle and assess the situation there. They will send word back to the Driftmark and if all goes according to plan, we will arrive and bring the rest of the fleet with us. He foresees a peaceful occupation.”

“Right now we must also send word to Lord Manderly at White Harbour. Jon has prepared an official order to his Master of Ships informing him of the situation and how he must deploy his ships. A copy of this letter will be sent to Lord Eddard Stark as well. He wants to migrate half of the fleet at White Harbour to Dragonstone. That will mean an additional sixty ships. Lord Manderly must make them operational immediately. The plan is to start moving them after he receives confirmation that we have taken possession of Dragonstone. Each day a convoy of five ships will leave White Harbour and sail to Dragonstone. Once they are all stationed there, we will have over one hundred ships and two dragons at our disposal. Nobody will be able to cast us from the island. At that stage we can start planning our next steps.”

Davos paused but nobody spoke up so he continued. "I have to prepare letters to all our allies informing them of the situation. We also need to get word out to Prince Oberyn. He is sailing north with his daughter. They will perhaps want to change the destination of their journey.”

“Why now in all this haste?” Ser Oswell objected. “King Robert is travelling north. Surely Dragonstone will stay vacant for many moons still.”

“Jon fears the situation will escalate now that word of the dragons is spreading. He wants to have a home base that is easily defendable. It is actually a smart move. Can you think of a safer place, in Westeros I mean, once his cover is blown?” Davos defended Jon’s strategy.

“As long as the Prince is with us when we travel to Dragonstone, I agree. Has anyone noticed we are at the wrong side of Westeros? We have a very long way to go. Did he mention how he wanted to travel to the Driftmark?” Ser Gerold enquired. It seemed he was willing to heed Jon’s instructions.

“Not precisely no. But I think he will want to take the quickest route. Perhaps you can work on a proposal by the time he comes back? You also need to know about the research Samwell Tarly is doing. Apparently the enemy north of the Wall has another weakness. Maester Aemon has written about a material called obsidian. It is some kind of dark volcanic glass that can destroy wights with a single touch. It doesn’t matter where you stab them. The Free Folk, or Wildlings as you call them, have a few pieces of it but too few to make a difference if the enemy comes at them with superior numbers. Jon wants Samwell Tarly to try and find more of this obsidian.”

“Did he describe this material in more detail?” Ser Arthur asked a curious expression on his face. Then he turned to Ser Barristan. “Do you not recall the time we lived with Prince Rhaegal on Dragonstone? There were some caves on that island, near the beach. The Prince once showed them to me saying all that glitter against the walls could just as well have been more rock. He envied the Lannisters their gold mines. The Targaryens got stuck with mines that only contained some sort of dark glass. It would cost more to mine it than the profit it would yield. The only use he saw for it was to make small ornaments or jewellery from it.”

“I never went inside so I can’t really confirm this. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have a look. One more reason to go to Dragonstone.” Ser Barristan looked at Davos when he uttered his last sentence.

“I’ll alert Samwell,” Davos promised. “This information could substantially shorten his search.”
“Ser Barristan?” Davos used this opportunity to relay Jon’s orders to the knight. “Jon wishes for you to depart for Essos when we reach the Driftmark. He wants you to sail to Pentos the same day the others receive the intelligence from our scout ship that it is safe for them to occupy Dragonstone. If all goes well, the Princess will be in Westeros by the time her safety and comfort can be guaranteed on Dragonstone.”

“I will be honoured to escort the Princess home.” Ser Barristan said truthfully.

“Sandor can you organise messengers and ravens? You can ask Sam to assist you. I want a messenger to make haste and catch up with Robb Stark if he can, or travel all the way to Winterfell himself if he cannot. A raven to White Harbour is also top priority. This raven needs to be followed by a messenger carrying the official decrees. Furthermore we need to prepare ravens for our allies.” Davos proceed to cite names. “

“Can you write that down for me? Only way to ensure I will do this right and not fuck it up.” Sandor complained.

“Excellent idea, I’ll do that right away.” Davos addressed the entire group now. “Let’s all start so we can reconvene before supper.

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In the meanwhile Jon had made good progress. He was glad he had dressed warmly. Sandor had been right all these years ago. You really could freeze to death if you weren’t careful. Luckily Rhaegal’s body heat warmed Jon’s legs and lower part of his body. If Jon got too cold he opened his mind a bit further and let Raeghal’s warmth flow through his body. The dragon even enjoyed these moments of unity. Rhaegal and Viserion didn’t seem to mind the cold, at least not yet.

It was rather dark when Jon landed south of Castle Black. He hoped the dragons could remain undetected until he had a chance to speak to his uncle. As far as he had been able to make out from high up in the air, all eyes on top of the Wall were surveying the lands north of the ice structure and were not paying any attention to what flew in from the south.

He had to knock on the gate several times before he heard a noise. He saw a small hatch being opened and a guard peak through it. “Who goes there? State your name and purpose.”

“My name is Jon Celtigar. I received an urgent message from your Maester. I am alone. Let me in so I can explain in more detail inside.” He spoke with an authority that had immediate effect. Jon heard a command being shouted. Moments later the large door opened slowly. Ten heavily armed men of the Night’s Watch watched him enter. ‘I am glad they are taking their safety serious. I must however talk to Jeor Mormont about guarding the south at night as well.’ Jon mused while he entered.

He noticed Jeor Mormont hurrying towards them. “What is the meaning of all this?” the man’s voice boomed over the courtyard. “Why has the gate been opened?”

“A visitor has arrived. He claims he was summoned by Maester Aemon, Lord Commander.” The guard who had let Jon enter explained.

“Jon Celtigar,” Jon introduced himself. “We met several years ago, Lord Commander. I need to speak to Maester Aemon on business that cannot be delayed. It concerns the scouting party Benjen Stark has accompanied.”
Jeor Mormont scanned the courtyard. “Did you come here on foot or did you just drop out of the sky?” Mormont now recalled the strange boy that had visited the wall when he was just a kid. He also remembered how the boy had been cooped up inside the Maester’s study for hours on end.

“We do not have time for this.” Jon tried to govern his temper. “Do you want the scouting party to come back alive or not?”

“And you will make a difference how exactly?” The Lord Commander asked in a condescending manner.

“Does it really hurt anyone to let me speak to Maester Aemon? I told you before he requested my presence and will be waiting for me as we speak.” Jon tried once more to get the man to comply. He was getting impatient. Every moment of delay could mean possible disaster for the scouting party.

“The Maester is probably asleep by now.” Mormont really didn’t know how much stranger this situation could get. “I repeat: did you come here on foot?”

“Never mind, I can find my own way.” Jon swiftly ducked one man and quickly disappeared into the building where he knew his uncle lived.

Jeor Mormont signalled his men to let him be. He would sit back and let the situation unfold. How much harm could one boy cause anyway. The Watch was safe.

“Look outside and see if you can find a horse or a wagon. And ask the men on top whether they have seen something suspicious coming in from the south.”

Jaremy Rykker hated to give the bad news to his Lord Commander. “Lord Commander, did you forget you specifically ordered all eyes to be directed north?” He hesitated to elaborate how his superior had justified his command by stating the Wildlings no longer scaled the Wall since their tentative pact and the threat to the north was top priority now. He also wanted to be alerted at the first sight of his loyal men returning and to do that they had to watch the north side.

Jeor Mormont sighed at the words of his Master at Arms. He had sent his most experienced ranger, Qhorin Halfhand and a promising young ranger Ed Tollet alongside Benjen Stark on this ridiculous scouting mission to prove that the White Walkers had risen again. He was eager to see his best men return.

Rykker tried to placate his commander. “I will personally scout the area outside the south gate. If there is something out there, trust me, I will find it.”

“Take enough torches with you. It is already dark out there. And do not go too far. You can always restart your search tomorrow at first light.” Mormont agreed to his request.

Jaremy Rykker, formerly known as Ser Jaremy Rykker a member of house Rykker a noble house in the Crownlands and fervent Targaryen supporter had ended up at the Wall after the Rebellion when the defeat of Prince Rhaegar at the Trident had meant immediate doom for all Targaryen loyalists. Given the choice between death and the Wall he had taken the latter and chosen to live. He had made a life here and worked himself up to Master at Arms. He took a torch in his hand, lit it and exited the courtyard. He motioned the guards to stay back. He would go alone. He would make a half-hearted attempt just to appease his Lord Commander. It was pitch dark outside. The search would be fruitless now anyway.

After a while he decided to give up. The only thing he had noticed was some faint light and smoke coming from the woods more than four miles from the Wall. If the young Lord had hidden his co-travellers there, they would still be there for him to find on the morrow. He memorised the position of
the smoke and went back inside.

In the meantime, Jon had reached the door of his uncle’s room without encountering further resistance. He knocked and entered not waiting for an invitation. A young steward was reading something aloud and startled at the unexpected stranger that entered. Clearly nobody had heard his knock.

“Maester Aemon?” Jon called for his uncle.

Pyp, leaves us please. You can retire. I will no longer need your services tonight.” Sensing the hesitation of the young man the old Maester added. “Do not worry. This is a good friend who has come a long way to pay an old man a visit.”

Pyp rose and smiled apologetically at the newcomer.

Jon introduced himself. “Lord Celtigar. I’m pleased the Maester has such loyal friends. Thank you Pyp.” The young man’s smile broadened and he left the room reassured the old Maester would be okay.

“Aegon, did you travel here on Rhaegal?” Maester Aemon couldn’t conceal his curiosity any longer. “Where did you leave him?”

Jon was taken aback by the sight of his uncle. The man had not aged well these last few years. He tried to keep his tone light in order to hide his shock.

“Actually I brought both dragons, uncle. It is already rather dark outside and nobody was watching this side of the wall. And yes I did fly here on Rhaegal’s back. It is an amazing thing uncle to fly through the air like that. I landed and told both dragons to wait for me in the woods several miles south of the Wall. As far as I can tell nobody suspects a thing.”

“And here I thought our defences had improved over the years. I will have a word with the Lord Commander about this.” He tilted his head toward Aegon. He had heard the young man settle down on the small stool he had used so many years ago.

“Let me hug you my boy. It has been so long. I feared I would never meet you again. I’ve been growing tired lately. I do not know why the Citadel has not sent us another Maester yet. I fear I will have to fake my death in order for them to do so.”

Jon kneeled before the frail body of his uncle and hugged him carefully. “Your letters have been my constant guides over the years, uncle. I hope you will live to celebrate many namedays yet. Now please tell me what I need to know so I can be on my way. Do you have a map or can you point me in the right direction?”

“But it is dark outside.” His uncle exclaimed.

“I can use the fires on top of the wall to orientate myself and I figure the scouting party will be very visible since they will defend themselves with a lot of fire. They will be easier to spot by night than in broad daylight. I will not be able to sleep tonight anyway. All I can think of is what if we are already too late. I came as soon as I could and I will not lose another instant.”

“I understand my boy. I have a map right there on the table. They are north west of the Fist of the First Men. If you draw a straight line from Castle Black to the Fist on the map, you visualise the angle you need to fly if you take the straight line the Wall forms as your starting point. Oh and take that piece of glass as well. I put the dragon glass dagger your uncle Benjen left here for research
purposes next to the map. If you happen to come across the enemy, this dagger will do more damage than a steel sword.”

“Thank you uncle. If you don’t mind I’ll be off now. Could you do me a favour and send a raven to Sea Dragon Point to let them know I have arrived safely at Castle Black?”

“I will do that tomorrow at first light. Take care, Aegon. I still have a lot to tell you. Be sure to come back.” His Targaryen uncle called after him.

“I will uncle, stay safe as well.” Jon left the room and hurried across the courtyard. When he arrived at the gate Jon addressed the same guard who let him enter before. “I would like to leave now please. Can you open the gates once more?”

The men on duty were taken by surprise. One of them opened the little hatch and checked if all was clear on the other side. They opened the gate just wide enough for Jon to walk through and closed it again.”

Not wanting to loose anymore time Jon checked to be certain the gate and the little hatch were closed. He called for his dragons to come to him while he was running toward them distancing himself from the Wall. He could sense Rhaegal flying toward him and knew Viserion would be close behind. It was too dark to see anything. ‘Give me a small flame so I can see you’, he sent the image to Rhaegal. He immediately saw the flame flying towards him. Moments later he had mounted Rhaegal and they were off. ‘Hold on uncle Benjen, I am almost there’, he thought. He flew over the Wall and told his dragons to fly without lighting the way until they were far enough from the Wall.

Little did he know that Jaremy Rykker had seen him leave and had watched him run toward a light in the dark. Rykker wasn’t sure what he had seen exactly but he would keep an eye on that young man if he ever came back for a visit. He fervently hoped his eyes hadn’t betrayed him.

Interlude 13: A popular Princess

Princess Daenerys made her usual stroll across the colourful market. Once every sennight she would indulge herself and saunter past the many stalls tasting all kinds of fruit or buying a bit of silk. Lately they had increased her already impressive surveillance. Word had it that the Dothraki were encamped rather close to the city.

But it was not the presence of the Dothraki that bothered her. Two sennights ago Prince Quentyn Martell had arrived at the mansion, citing they were good family and it was high time they got to know each other. At first the Prince had been very charming and polite. Daenerys had been flattered by his attentions. Nevertheless she had kept her guard up and had tried to ferret out who had sent him to her. Jon had never once mentioned Dorne being in on his schemes. Only Prince Oberyn was a close ally but Jon had emphasised that Prince Oberyn acted separate from his brother Prince Doran. She was extra careful never to betray Jon’s existence and had instructed her household not to mention her nephew’s existence either.

Prince Quentyn had offered her sanctuary in Dorne on several occasions. When she didn’t accept, he kept coming up with reasons for her to live with them in Westeros. Although the conversations became tedious, she always made the effort to be graceful in her refusals. Yesterday however the Prince had dropped all pretence and had formally proposed marriage. She had been in a bit of a bind. She certainly didn’t want to be pressured into marrying him. However there was no way she could
tell him that she needed a formal approval of the head of house Targaryen. She had rejected him, citing she had a previous betrothal that needed to remain a secret for political reasons. To her it was not strictly a lie. It was something she hoped would become true sometime.

The Prince had not been deterred. Ever since he had doubled his efforts to find some time alone with her. Daenerys never let him within six feet of her without having her Septa by her side and at least three armed guards. Even during the shortest trip inside her own home she had at least two guards tailing her. She was counting the days until he would relent and return to Dorne.

Prince Quentyn was not the first suitor she had turned down. Over the years many a rich merchant or impoverished noble had courted her. She however had either politely refused them or barred them entrance when they became too insistent.

She was just perusing a book on her favourite bookstand at the local market when she spotted Prince Quentyn coming her way. She looked around to see where her guards were. She panicked when she couldn’t find them immediately. It seemed she had underestimated the Prince. He had somehow lured her guards away without arousing her suspicion. The bookstall happened to be next to a small alley. He had planned it well. Before she knew it he had her cornered at the back end of the little alley. His body sheltered hers from view. She stood in a corner and had only a small space to manoeuvre to her right. When she took a step in that direction he immediately mirrored her movement.

“I hate to do it this way. You can still consent to be my wife and marry me today. If not...” He came closer and grabbed both her shoulders. “I am sure I can think of another way to persuade you.”

The sneer on his face made Daenerys wonder how she could ever have thought him charming. Her brain was working overtime trying to find a way out of her current predicament. Without any warning she let out a big scream. Then she followed it up by a cry for help before he could clamp her mouth shut.

When Daenerys saw a fearsome half naked man with a braid approach in answer to her cry for help, she wondered whether her desperate move had not gotten her into even more trouble. Before Prince Quentyn even noticed the intruder, he had been struck unconscious. The savage looking man grinned at Daenerys. “No cry, safe now.”

Daenerys nodded her head in thanks but could not totally lift the anxious expression from her face. She calmed down when she looked in him the eyes and realised he did not mean to harm her. Her warm brown eyes expressed admiration but not the calculated and sometimes lusty look Prince Quentyn didn’t try to hide from her any longer. The smile on her saviour’s face looked sincere.

“Beauty have man no?” The man really turned on his charm now exposing a row of fine white teeth when he smiled at her.

Daenerys was too stunned to answer.

Suddenly the warrior turned around, some kind of curved blade held out before him. Daenerys saw Ser Jorah and two of her houseguard running up the ally, their swords drawn.

“Daenerys touched her saviour’s arm. “Please do not hurt them, they are my guards.” She had just realised he must be a Dothraki. Who else had a braid reaching down below one’s waist? The curved blade had been the final piece of the puzzle.

The man who shielded her body from view turned his head toward her, still holding his arakh before him ready to slice at anyone who dared to come closer. “Guards? No husband?” He pronounced these words with a very thick accent.
“Guards,” she affirmed. “Friends.”

The Dothraki studied her closely before stepping aside. He addressed Ser Jorah. “Keep woman safe for you.” He simply stated.

“And we thank you for it Ser.” Ser Jorah bowed to him. He studied the body of Prince Quentyn Martell lying on the ground and checked if the young man was still breathing. Then he looked up at his Princess. “You are not harmed my Princess?”

“Just very scared I hate to admit. Where were you when I needed you?” She had been worried he had been hurt or worse. But here he was safe and sound. She hoped he had a good explanation for deserting her.

“We got blocked by a cart that capsized before our feet. The streets are very narrow and it took us some time to climb over it. I apologise Princess, we should have spread out more. That way they would not have been able to get to all of us at the same time. I seems I have become complacent and will take measures. Please accept my sincerest apologies.” Ser Jorah explained looking very contrite.

Daenerys didn’t have a chance to react because the Dothraki spoke up once more, a reverent expression having appeared on his face.


Daenerys had to admit he did so elegantly for such a large man. She smiled and curtsied in return.

“Nice to meet you, Khal Drogo. I am very grateful for your help. Is it your Khalasar that is camped outside of Pentos?” Daenerys was more at ease now. She didn’t believe he meant her any harm and besides she had three guards to fall back on. She spotted a fourth one at the entrance of the ally. He was preventing the curious crowd that had gathered there from entering.

“Yes, me big Khal, big Khalasar. Pentos buy horses.” Khal Drogo tried to impress her, his dark eyes never left her face.

‘Great, one suitor down, another one takes his place’, Daenerys thought and had to keep a solemn face to prevent herself from rolling her eyes or giggling out loud at the comic situation. She owed it to him to stay polite at the very least.

“Let me invite you to our home to give you proper thanks for saving me from this attack, Khal Drogo.” She offered.

“Kay,” the Khal smiled from ear to ear now. “You live big thing on hill. I see once.”

“Princess, is this wise?” Ser Jorah whispered having followed their interactions with astonishment and apprehension.

She replied in High Valyrian but kept her voice down all the same. “Better befriend him than make him an enemy.” She switched back to the common tongue. See to it that Quentyn Martell does not wake up before he finds himself on a boat on the open sea heading back to Dorne.”

“Consider it done my Princess.” Ser Jorah gave orders to two of her houseguards and handed them money to buy passage for the unconscious man.

They arrived at the mansion without further incident. The presence of Khal Drogo had done wonders to disperse the onlookers that blocked the alley. He had shouted an order to two fierce looking Dothrakis. They followed him at a discreet distance.

When they entered the strong gates that protected Daenerys’ home, a stable boy ran up to take the horses to the stables. Drogo ordered his two companions to stay outside and wait for him there.
Daenerys quickly whispered a few words in the ear of the boy. “Find your superior and ask him to find our tallest most healthy horse. You know what I mean, one the Dothraki can appreciate. I want to present it to him as a gift when he is ready to leave.” The boy looked surprised but hurried off eager to please the best employer he had served here in Pentos.

Khal Drogo entered the mansion and was inspecting everything he saw. Daenerys recalled how they lived a nomadic life and her way of living must be as strange to him as his was to hers.

“Please sit down. Can I offer you some refreshments? Drink?” She added seeing his nonplussed expression.

“Drink,” he affirmed choosing the chair closest to her. He kept observing every little detail. He studied her Septa who had entered the room and acted as a chaperone. When Moelle turned crimson he turned his attention to the three guards that didn’t leave the room and the one stationed in the corridor. Then a puzzled expression appeared on his face when he observed it was Daenerys who directed the servant and how the man obeyed her smallest request without uttering a word.

“Woman give orders? Not husband?” he asked perplexed by the situation.

“Yes, they answer to me.” She offered him some fruit which he took but the questioning look stayed on his face.

“No husbaaand.” He slurred the last part of that word. “Woman obey husband no?”

This was her opening to stop his intentions. A little white lie to protect herself wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“My husband is across the Narrow Sea. I will travel to him shortly.” She repeated and pointed at the shores. Big water. We travel across it by boat. And live where the water stops. Westeros.”

She saw he understood. “Westeros no good. Poison waters no good.”

“You do not have to drink the water. Just use it to travel across it in a ship.”

The Khal’s attention was no longer on the water. “Husband good, brave, strong? Khaleesi not like husband then Drogo can kill.”

“No,” Daenerys stopped him. “I have a very good husband, very kind. He will soon come to get me. We will both leave and travel to Westeros. He is Khal in Westeros.”

Khal Drogo deflated a bit but seemed to accept this explanation. “Husband Khal then kay.”

He rose to his feet and put his breast forward. He was a head taller than Ser Jorah and liked to show off his height.

“Khal leave now.” He addressed Ser Jorah. “You guard, Khaleesi safe.”

Ser Jorah nodded his assent. “I will, I promise.”

Daenerys accompanied him outside where a beautiful stallion was stomping his feet impatiently.

“Please accept this humble offering. It is my thanks to you for saving me.” She watched him admire the horse. As far as she could tell he liked what he saw.

After thorough inspection of the horse, the Khal turned his attention to her. He then sighed and accepted the gift. He handed the reins to one of his fellow Dothrakis who had entered the courtyard. He executed another awkward bow and mounted his own horse. One last time he stared deeply into
her eyes, this time with apparent regret before swiftly turning his horse and riding out of the gates without looking back.

“Are you sure that was wise Princess?” Ser Jorah asked having witnessed the entire scene. “Aren’t you afraid he will try something? He seemed much taken with you.”

Daenerys answered him standing her ground. “Now that my debt is paid and he accepted the horse, his honour will prevent him from robbing us or doing me any harm. Yes, I do believe this was a wise move Ser Jorah. I have read a book about their customs and social behaviour. I have paid my debt and he will respect my virtue because he believes I am the wife of someone he considers an equal. A Khal will never steal another Khal’s wife as long as his rival is alive. The dishonourable conduct of the Dornish Prince is a greater threat. He was going to rape me. He believe that way I would have no other recourse but to marry him. You should concentrate your efforts on keeping such men from me.”

“I will do as you ask, my Princess. As soon as I hear back from the men who tended to Prince Quentyn I will inform you. And I will take extra security measures when you visit the market in a sennight. You will not have to give up your only excursion outside these walls or feel unsafe doing it. That I vow to you.” Ser Jorah bowed his head.

Princess Daenerys acknowledged his promise with a nod of her head and went back inside. She planned to write another long letter to her nephew. She hoped the talk of all these suitors harassing her would urge Aegon to move up his time table and let her come to Westeros as soon as possible. As far as she could tell by his written reports, he had the means to keep her safe already. She didn’t necessarily have to live on Dragonstone. She would be willing to travel with him. Three fully staffed ships surely were enough to keep her safe? Sometimes she wondered whether he would ever come for her at all.

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Almost two moons after the incident with Prince Quentyn, Princess Daenerys was quietly sitting downstairs. Her Septa was reading to her from one of Jon’s books. It distracted her from her latest quandary. She would soon have to write Jon about the tentative alliance the Tyrells had offered her. She was hesitant however. Her fear was that her nephew could possibly jump on the opportunity and offer her hand to the Tyrell’s in exchange for the support of a prospering kingdom.

She realised her musings had distracted her and she had missed part of the story. “I’m sorry Moelle. My thoughts wandered for a bit. Can you read that last paragraph again please?”

Before the Septa could comply, Ser Jorah entered the room. “Princess, a visitor to see you.”

Daenerys sighed. “If it is another suitor, please send him on his way. I had my fill of them for now. Tell him I am already married or use another excuse to get rid of him. If this continues, I will have to up my guard.”

Ser Jorah smiled. “I am fairly certain this man is not another suitor Princess. I believe he will be a most welcome visitor.” He gestured the man to enter the room. “May I present to you Ser Barristan the Bold, former Kingsguard of your brother Prince Rhaegar, currently serving your nephew Prince Aegon?”
Next chapter Jon meets the Free Folk and changes his priorities
The interlude will take us to the Reach.
Changing priorities

Chapter Summary

Jon to the rescue.
Lady Olenna is hedging her bets.

Chapter Notes

In my universe, Mace Tyrell has two sons, Willas and Loras and one daughter, Margaery.

Another long chapter, I hope you all enjoy reading it.
This work is still unbeta'd.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somewhere north west of the Fist of the First Men.

“We’re fucked!” Tormund was exhausted. Once more it had been a long night. “We’re trapped out here. How long can we go on like this?”

“I believe there is still enough wood in the immediate environment to last us a few nights. We’ll take shifts again alternating between sleeping and gathering wood.” Benjen Stark tried to stay calm although he was cold, bone-tired and close to giving up himself. He was sitting down, his back leaning against Qhorin Halfhand’s back so they could provide each other the welcome support they would normally seek against a tree. It was not safe yet to leave the circle of fire they constructed each night around their small encampment. All their belongings lay in the center, their weapons within easy reach. The men huddled close together forming a ring around the heap of furs, armour and provisions. The fire they lighted every night encircled them, providing everyone just enough room the stretch their legs.

“The only thing left is pray to the Gods they will tire of this game and leave us alone,” Tormund muttered. Then he spoke up for all to hear. “They are just toying with us. They have all the time in the world and probably know we’ll eventually grow weak from hunger and cold.”

“Or run out of wood before that,” the Thenn grumbled.

Benjen didn’t like that man and always sat furthest away from him if he could help it. He had forgotten his name. Tormund Giantsbane hardly ever addressed his men by name. If he needed to get someone’s attention, he used an insulting term to address them. Benjen was impressed with the extent of the man’s vocabulary. Giantsbane had yet to use a jibe twice.

It was a diverse group he travelled with. Tormund Giantsbane was here to represent Mance Rayder. He is the King beyond the Wall’s second in command. The big man had a feral look about him. His unkept beard was almost longer than his fiery red hair, the wind tussling both into tangled messes.
Benjen guessed it hadn’t been combed for years. His best features were is blue eyes. The man was a giant. Although now that Benjen had met actual giants, it was better to state that the man was just taller than any other man he knew. Somehow Giantsbane was able to get this band of misfits to function together without killing each other.

Each Wildling represented a different clan of the Free Folk. They were recognizable by their different attire and tattoos. There were of course more clans, but Mance Rayder had decided a group of ten would be more productive than a larger group. Besides even Giantsbane’s leadership skills would have trouble keeping a larger group in line, or so had the King Beyond the Wall confessed to Benjen Stark.

The Watch had also sent two representatives along. Qhorin Halfhand had been the obvious choice since he was the only crow who had earned the respect of the Free Folk. The other one was a young ranger named Ed Tollet. Qhorin Halfhand saw potential in the young man and was grooming him to become a leading ranger. Benjen Stark was here because he got stuck with representing the Warden of the North on this mission. Instead of returning to Jon after he had dropped off Loras Tyrell and Brienne of Tarth at Winterfell, his brother had ordered him to help assess the threat at the Wall. Benjen knew the situation beyond the Wall was not getting any better and his conscious had told him it was the right thing to do.

Benjen heard Rattlebone complain. “You wouldn’t try my plan to move our position during daylight. It would have been slow going but we could eventually have encountered a group of Free Folk and stood more of a chance to eradicate these dead fuckers.” The man still wasn’t happy his suggestion had been overruled. Rattlebone had shifted slightly while he spoke, rattling the bones fixed to his sinister coat.

“I told you before I promised Mance Rayder I wouldn’t reveal the location of any Free Folk settlement. For all we know, these dead cunts are just waiting for us to do just that. Scare us but not kill us. It is fucking likely they want us to reach our people. Perhaps a large army of dead cunts is just lurking somewhere in the neighbourhood waiting for us to make a move so they can find more of our kin to turn into dead fuckers. As far as I am concerned I prefer to give the enemy a mere ten new recruits instead of several clans of the Free Folk”. Tormund Giantsbane’s authority had kept the men in line so far. Benjen didn’t envy him. It certainly was not easy being the leader of such a dysfunctional group.

Giantsbane reminded Benjen somewhat of Sandor Clegane. He was sure Sandor Clegane and Tormund Giantsbane would make for lively entertainment on a cold and dreary winters’ day. He was undecided which one of the two had the more colourful vocabulary. His daydreaming was interrupted when the representative of the cave people spoke up. “Then we are truly fucked. Why still bother resisting?”

“You know,” Benjen Stark remarked an absent expression on his face. “There exists this one person who can help us and I told him not to.” A sad smile ghosted over his face. Their mission had been a fool’s errand and doomed to fail. They had been out here for almost a moon and not a single White Walker had been spotted, only a lot of these so called wights. The sole purpose of this mission was to convince the crows and the Warden of the North that these White Walkers really existed.

Ten pairs of unbelieving eyes met Benjen’s “You know a fucking God, Stark? You cannot make us believe that a single human could solve our predicament, most certainly not a single southerner. We need a fucking army preferably one armed to the teeth with dragonglass. We are completely surrounded and are only alive because those dead fuckers are vulnerable to fire and somehow do not function during the day so we get a reprieve to hunt for food and gather extra wood.” Tormund Giantsbane exclaimed.
“Do you think your crows would send an army to fetch you if we could get a message to them?” Orell interjected.

“It doesn’t matter anyway. We have no ravens left.” Benjen was quick to point out to the strange man. He was a singular fellow. This must have been one of the first times Benjen had heard him speak. Usually his unnerving stare kept everyone at bay. A moon in his company had taught Benjen that the man kept to himself and only communicated with Tormund Giantsbane.

“Could you guide your eagle such a distance Orell?” Tormund looked at him. “Why didn’t you say something before?”

Orell looked in Stark’s direction with disdain. “How will that southerner react to a skinchanger?”

“I don’t give a fuck about his reaction if it means we still have a chance to survive this. Fuck Orell, we could have sent for help days ago!” Tormund was almost shouting now.

“What’s a skinchanger?” Benjen kept his tone level in the hope of calming things down. “Are you trying to tell me you can enter the mind of an eagle?”

“What if I could?” A defiant Orell fixed his strange eyes on him.

“I would call you a warg. You would not be the first one I encountered. I know of one south of the wall.” Benjen stated in a matter of fact tone trying not be the one to look away first.

His words startled Orell whose eyes widened even more.

“Enough with the eye fucking already,” Tormund always a man of action was getting impatient. “We’ve already lost valuable daylight. Stark do your word writing thing and let’s get a message on its way. If you do know a fucking God, I’d say now is the time to beg for his help.” It was a halfhearted joke but Benjen Stark contemplated his words in earnest. It could be worth a try.

Giantsbane addressed four men who had witnessed the scene and were now talking animatedly among each other.

“You idle cunts, start fetching wood and wake us when the sun has reached its peak. I’ll take first watch. The rest of you lot try to catch some sleep. That goes for you too, big friend of a mighty God. Get some rest when you’re done scribbling.”

“I’ll go with them.” Qhorin Halfhand rose to his feet and stretched his stiff limbs. Giantsbane nodded his assent and watched them leave.

Benjen observed Orell closely when the man lifted his head upward his eyes turning white. It was a disturbing sight. He had seen Jon warg before but the boy always closed his eyes. Soon enough an eagle landed on Orell’s shoulder.

Benjen had written a short but subtle message to Maester Aemon. He would not explicitly ask for Jon to send a dragon. He would hand the responsibility of this decision over to the Maester. He carefully attached the small scroll to a leg of the large bird. All the while the eagle watched him with the same unsettling stare as Orell often used. Benjen was relieved when the scroll was secured and the eagle flew away in the direction of Castle Black. Now all they had to do was stay alive as long as possible and pray help would come whilst they still drew breath. Well at least there was a shimmer of hope now.

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Two days later they were preparing for another long night of keeping these creepy walking dead
men at bay. Benjen stood alert in the small space. He examined the circle of fire thoroughly. A few
nights ago the fire had died down in one spot and several wights had been able to enter their space
before they had had a chance to rekindle the fire.
Luckily the few pieces of obsidian the Free Folk had brought with them had been enough to destroy
the dead that had gotten through.
The first time Benjen had seen the Free Folk put down an undead soldier with a piece of dark glass
he had been stunned. Ordinary steel did not deter the enemy, even if one cut of a piece of a wight’s
body, the rest of the corpse just kept attacking. But just a small cut with a dagger made of volcanic
glass and the creatures turned to ash and bones. You didn’t even need to stab a vital part of them, any
hit would do. It had taken Benjen some effort to persuade Mance Rayder to loan him a dagger to
take with him to Castle Black. The Free Folk only had a few of them left and they considered these
more valuable than anything else. The small daggers were the only effective weapon they possessed
aside from fire.
When Benjen had shown the dagger to Maester Aemon, the man had touched the cold material with
a thoughtful expression on his face. He had called for Jeor Mormont and in the old arsenal with
discarded weapons they had found a small stack of this material. Maester Aemon had asked the Lord
Commander to assign two of his most educated men to help him search the books on the Long
Night. They would also browse through the old reports from previous Lord Commanders of the
Night’s Watch. Jeor Mormont had sent two stewards that were able to read to help the old Maester.
Benjen hoped he could make good on his promise to Mance Rayder. He prayed they could
somehow find more of this material. He had urged Maester Aemon to read up on all of the known
mines in Westeros.
A shout from Tormund Giantsbane had all his senses on alert. “Here they come. Form up in a circle
and do not let the fire go out. The large man had a small dagger in one hand and a torch in the other.
Benjen preferred the combination of his glass dagger and sword. The steel sword didn’t kill the
wights but it could cripple them. A corpse without legs was not so big a threat anymore. He had cut
countless wights in half these last few nights.
Suddenly a large ice spear was thrown their way. They were completely taken by surprise. It had
been thrown with superior force and the spear pierced Qhorin Halfhand’s torso. The man died
instantly. Everyone froze. This was no longer a mindless attack of numb creatures that seemed to
have no brains. This was a calculated move of a powerful enemy.
“Use your shields,” Giantsbane shouted, “and for fuck’s sake move his body and burn it. I will not
fight a blue eyed undead Qhorin if I can help it. There must be a White Walker near. Scouts have
described them carrying such spears. Keep your eyes and ears open. If I am right and a White Fuck
is near, this will be an even more trying night.”
“One by one they left their circle to fetch shields and the few pieces of armour they had stacked in
the middle of their little safe haven. The others made sure to close the gap and defend the entire
perimeter.”
“Is it me or are there more wights out there than before?” the Thenn remarked.
“Stop talking and keep fending them off”. Giantsbane ordered with laboured breath. “If some of us
fail we all fall. One gap and we will be overrun, there are too many of them.”
The night was not yet half way through but Benjen Stark was already getting desperate. His swordarm ached. The screeching of the wights was deafening. As far as the light of their circle of fire allowed him to see, hundreds of wights stood waiting to replace their fallen brothers. It was hopeless. He knew praying would do him no good but he still turned his head upwards for a small moment to send a quick prayer to the old Gods. It looked as if his plea got an instant answer. A large light lit up the sky. A moment later the ground seemed to catch fire too.

“What the fuck is that?” Giantsbane called out. Everyone looked at the large flames that descended from the sky, burning through their enemy before their very eyes. Benjen narrowed his eyes in an attempt to see more clearly. He could now distinguish two large shadows. By the Gods, there actually were two dragons spouting fire and systematically pushing the enemy back. Jon had answered his call and sooner than expected.

“That’s my fucking friend I sent the message to remember!” Benjen called out looking smug. The wights had stalled their attack and Benjen’s companions all stared with utter awe at the two large creatures that flew in wide circles, always changing direction to avoid becoming a target but raining fire in an effective pattern forcing the enemy to retreat.

Benjen was proud of his nephew. He couldn’t have devised a better tactic himself. The fires lit up their direct environment and the men on the ground could now discern the small figure on one of the powerful flying beasts. They stared with open mouth.

When Jon was sure a large area around the defensive circle was cleared of the enemy, he ordered Rhaegal down, loosened the two bags he had brought with him and dismounted. He urged the green dragon to take to the sky again. ‘You’ll be safer there and can keep an eye out for the enemy.’ he sent the thought to Rhaegal’s mind.

Benjen tempered the fire on one side so Jon could enter their little circle. The hugged each other desperately. “What took you so long? Benjen’s joke fell flat.

“Why didn’t you send for me sooner?” Jon reproached. “However did you survive this long? Do they always attack in such large numbers? I would not have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” Jon looked around and saw the Free Folk stare at him with adoration in their eyes.

Tormund Giantsbane came forward and spoke up. “You are very powerful. We are lucky you fight on our side. How do you command those fire creatures?”

“They are called dragons.” Jon hesitated not knowing how to address the man.

“This is Tormund Giantsbane. The right hand of the King Beyond the Wall.” His uncle helped Jon. “Tormund Giantsbane, meet my kinsmen,” he hesitated on the name, “Jon Targaryen.” He finished. When Jon rode dragons he was a true Targaryen. He sent a wordless apology to his nephew.

“They obey you? Tormund repeated his question. “You can call me Tormund.”

“They do Tormund. You see, I raised them ever since they were hatched and were no larger than a kitten. They consider me their parent.”

“He is also a skinchanger and can control them that way as well.” Benjen added knowing that would earn Jon even more respect.

Orell stepped forward and kneeled before Jon. “I am honoured to make your acquaintance. I have only heard very old stories of mythical wargs controlling such large beasts.

The other leaders of the Free Folk kneeled as well.
Jon took in the scene and was completely at a loss. The most heard statement of the Free Folk was that they were free and kneeled to no one.

“Please get up.” Jon was really embarrassed now. “We are not safe yet. It is still a long way to Castle Black. And I do not know if I can stay with you the entire time. I promised I would only be gone for a few days.”

“Let’s get through this night first. Tomorrow morning we will start our trek back.” Tormund had been the first one back on his feet. The others were slowly following his example. Orell reluctantly left his kneeling position.

“I brought furs, food and something to drink with me that will keep you warm. Also a few weapons but just the one dagger made of volcanic glass I am afraid. If you are low on food, my dragons can hunt for you in the morning.”

“Jon behind you! Benjen yelled. Jon instinctively ducked the spear that now flew over his head before turning around and drawing Blackfyre from its scabbard. He immediately pounced forward stabbing the figure that approached him by stepping over the wood where the fire had been extinguished by his uncle earlier. It looked like a man entirely made of ice. ‘A white Walker’, he realised. ‘Damn I should have drawn the glass dagger.’ But before he could even finish that thought the creature before him exploded in a thousand ice crystals. Numerous wights that had come running up behind it all fell lifeless to the ground.

The members of the Free Folk who had drawn their weapons once more upon hearing Benjen Stark cry out were speechless. The boy clearly was magic, that or he came straight from the Gods.

“You just slew a fucking White Walker! That’s the first time I ever heard they could be destroyed! Do you have a magical sword as well young slayer?” Again Tormund was the first one to come to his senses.

“I don’t, I didn’t …” Jon was at a loss for words.

“It is a rare sword.” Benjen came to his nephew’s rescue. “There are only a few of these left in the realm. It is made of a material called Valyrian Steel. You will be able to see the difference with our steel swords when it grows lighter. Let’s rekindle the circle of fire and watch each other’s backs. Who knows what is still out there?”

“If you can protect me while I sit here in the middle of this circle, I will warg into my dragon to scout the environment. He handed his sword to his uncle. “Take it for now.” When his uncle hesitated he added. “Don’t worry, I will want it back the moment I am done here.”

Jon sat down, closed his eyes and asked Rhaegal if he could fly along with him in his mind. The dragon was only too happy to comply. He didn’t like this strange cold land and the creepy enemy they had just scared away. He hadn’t seen the white shape attacking his human until it was too late. He would be glad when the light returned to the sky. Jon reassured both dragons he was all right and warged with Rhaegal asking him several times to use his flames to provide the necessary light to scan the ground for the enemy.

The Free Folk observed from their position on the ground how the dragons flew in circles over the area, little bursts of flame betraying their whereabouts. Soon they could hardly see them anymore. The darkness seemed to have swallowed them up.

Finally Jon stirred. He had aborted his scouting mission with Rhaegar. “I could only see a few creatures and they were moving away from us. My guess is that by defeating that White Walker, we somehow destroyed most of the army present tonight. I saw hundreds of corpses. I will ask the
dragons to burn these bodies at dawn. It would not do for another White Walker to come by and raise them once more.” Jon accepted Blackfyre from his uncle and put the sword back in its scabbard.

“You believe the White Fuckers are the ones to raise these dead fuckers and they become lifeless when he is defeated?” Tormund asked.

“It is just a guess. But you all saw what happened to most of the wights when the White Walker exploded in ice crystals. Somehow they were connected.” Jon stated. “I also believe the White Walker controlled them somehow.

“So you think it is safe for now? They will not attack again tonight?” Orell asked Jon.

“I believe so. The few that were still moving were fleeing north. We should stay vigilant though. Most of us can rest but a few will need to stand guard.” Jon looked at Giantsbane so the man knew it was up to him to assign the tasks.

“How do you control both dragons?” Orell was fascinated by the young man before him.

“Well, I can feel the dragons and link our minds. That way I can sense what they are thinking without changing into their skin. Once the link is established, I am able to send thoughts to them. If I really concentrate I can also send images to their minds. The dragons share a mental connection with each other as well. If I can reach one, he can tell the other without making a sound. I only really warg into the green dragon, I mean change into his skin, when I want to examine things from high up through his eyes or need to react very quickly to new situations. You understand?” Jon looked at the strange man beside him and saw him nod with a devoted expression in his big eyes.

“You are a warg as well?” Jon guessed.

“I am, but not as powerful. I have my eagle and I can only communicate with him if I change into his skin. If I try really hard I can warg into other small animals like ravens. But with my eagle it is easier.”

“It is the same for me.” Jon was glad to finally talk to someone who had experience with warging. “My connection to my direwolf is second nature as well. If I try to warg into the mind of an unfamiliar animal I need to concentrate a lot harder.” He had not looked up while he talked and therefore had missed the looks of complete awe on the faces of his audience.

“A direwolf? You can warg into a direwolf? That is one of the more ferocious creatures that live here.” Orell’s excitement made him raise his voice. All the others had heard his outburst and were waiting to see how the boy would react.

“I can. I found him when he was but a small pup. Actually, I think he found me. He entered my mind before I ever laid eyes on him. You could say he chose me.” Jon tried to explain as best as he could.

“I fucking need to introduce you to Mance Rayder. The man would give his crown to you in an instant if he had one.” Tormund’s respect for the boy knew no bounds.

“Mance Rayder? He is your King Beyond the Wall?” Jon asked. “I would like to speak to him as well. I do not know when that will be possible though. I will first have to fly back to inform my entourage of my plans.”

“What are you saying Jon?” Benjen Stark was exhausted but his tired mind had still caught the intent in Jon’s words.
“I am going to assess the situation here. I will scout during the next few days and when I am sure I can safely leave you for some time, I will fly back to my advisers and inform them of what happened here. I must convince them that the situation beyond the Wall requires our immediate attention. The Iron Throne has waited for seventeen years and can wait a few moons or longer if necessary. The safety at the Wall is also the responsibility of a true ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. I cannot turn my back on this. The presence of my dragons will probably mean the difference between life and death for tens of thousands of Free Folk living beyond the Wall.”

“But Jon, Ser Gerold, your Kingsguard?” Benjen understood what his nephew was trying to say but he knew very well an outsider would not easily believe what was going on beyond the Wall. Hells, he hadn’t believed the full extent of the situation himself before this night.

“I will try to explain to them what is happening here. If we do not help now, the army of the dead will only grow its numbers. If we stall too long we will probably have to fight an army that has absorbed all of the Free Folk and numbers over a hundred thousand strong. If I can make Ser Gerold understand this, there will be no further discussion. Besides, we have a very good strategy: target the White Walkers. If I can scout from up high and know long in advance where they are, we can adapt our positions.”

Although the two southerners had been speaking in a low voice and faced each other, the representatives of the Free Folk had tried to follow this conversation and had picked up most of the content. Again Tormund was their spokesman. “You are King of the Southerners and you volunteer to help us Free Folk?”

Jon startled. This was a new situation for him. First uncle Benjen had exposed him as a Targaryen and now a whole bunch of strangers just overheard his plans to overthrow King Robert. He decided to throw caution to the wind and be straightforward for once. He looked Tormund Giantsbane in the eye and his voice rang clear when he justified his future actions.

“I am no King yet. My grandfather was King. My father was murdered as were my siblings and our throne was stolen. Loyal people hid me when I was a baby. Now that I am an adult and my dragons have grown up as well, I will force the man that murdered my family from the throne and become King. I intend to do this step by step, hopefully without the use of my dragons. I do not want to harm the people of the Seven Kingdoms, they were not at fault. But yes, I hope that within several moons I will be King of the Southerners. I will carry the title of ‘Protector of the Realm’. That means I will protect you who live in the north just as I would help the people that live in the south if they were threatened by an enemy they couldn’t fend off themselves.” Jon exhaled deeply. Somehow he felt lighter. Something about this group made him drop his guard. Among them, he could be himself for once and not pretend.

“If you help us defeat these white fuckers and keep our families safe, I will personally help you kill the cunt that murdered your family and has stolen your throne.” Tormund promised immediately.

“I hope it won’t come to that. My plan is to persuade most of his allies to my side by diplomacy and to bluff or intimidate Robert Baratheon into giving up the throne. But I’ll keep your promise in mind Tormund, thank you. Now does anyone want a drink? I brought a special brew that should keep you warm. And if anyone needs extra furs or another weapon, help yourselves.”

Drinks were shared and toasts made. Jon used the opportunity to eat something as well. Then he claimed one fur and lay down on the ground. “Now if you don’t mind, I would like to catch some sleep. I have come a long way and it has been some time since I had a bit of rest.”

“You can sleep soundly Southern King. I will personally see to it that your magic sword will not be stolen from you.” Tormund promised Jon.

Benjen smiled. Leave it to Jon to win some of the fiercest warriors of the Free Folk over in less than
half a night. He couldn’t wait to tell Ned.

“What will your fire beasts do while you rest?” Orell asked. He had not let the fascinating young man out of his sight and would try to learn everything he could from him.

Jon closed his eyes for just a short moment. “The dragons have found a cave and are resting now. They will hunt for food in the morning.” Jon reassured Orell. He pulled the furs around him and fell asleep almost instantly.

Benjen watched his nephew’s even breaths. He marveled at the fact that the boy was instantly at ease in such a cold and rough environment. Not to mention falling asleep among Wildlings he had just met and who already kissed the ground he walked on. He lay down next to him trying to combine their body heat and threw his black furs over the both of them. It was cold out but the heat of the fires encircling them kept them from freezing. People at court would never believe this. Could you imagine Prince Joffrey sleeping outside in the cold among uneducated strangers without any comfort except the clothes on his back and a warm fur coat? He forced the ridiculous image from his mind and before he realised it, exhaustion had gotten the better of him and he was asleep as well.

When Benjen awoke, he didn’t spot Jon right away. “Where is he?” he shouted in a panic, waking up the rest of their little group. “I’m here uncle, just stretching my legs.” Jon appeared behind the large body of Tormund Giantsbane. The two men were gnawing on a piece of meat and Giantsbane carried something over his shoulder.

“I kept an eye on your King for you Stark. The two of us found something fresh to eat for everyone.” Giantsbane boasted. “The dragonrider can shoot a mean arrow. He could easily become one of us.”

Benjen couldn’t miss the camaraderie that seemed to have developed between his nephew and the leader of this mission.

Giantsbane looked at his coincidental hunting partner. “Your skill with a bow is very valued by the Free Folk. It can get you a woman in your bed every night.” He enjoyed the youth’s blushing face. “Don’t tell me you command dragons but are afraid of a woman’s cunt.”

“I am not but now is not the time for this.” Jon replied his face still on fire.

“A pity, I think I know just the one for you. Hair kissed by fire she has, just like me. Good with a bow as well. A great pity.” He shook his head. “If ever you change your mind, you just have to say the word. With your pretty curls and bow arm, Ygritte could be yours whether you wanted her or not.”

Jon tried to ignore Tormund’s last words and sat down next to his uncle. “Tormund told me we should eat and be on our way as soon as possible. I’m sure you agree.”

His uncle signalled Tormund behind Jon’s back to let the boy be for now. “I’ll be glad to leave here and I would have done it sooner if I could.” He answered his nephew. They both smiled now. “Did you sleep well out here on the ground?”

“Come on uncle, this is not the first time we had to sleep under the sky. Besides, I was exhausted. The long flight to the wall, hardly stopping at Castle Black to get directions and then trying to see in the dark on the way over here, a man could get tired from less.”

“A man you call yourself? Did I miss your seventeenth nameday? I lost track of time out here?”
Benjen bumped his shoulder.

“Not yet. Give it a few days.” Jon smiled. “Of all the things to talk about right now, this isn’t important uncle. What do you know of those White Walkers? How many are there? Do you think I killed that one because my sword is made of Valyrian Steel?”

“Well, that and your lightening quick reflexes. I saw the White Walker trying to stab you with an icy dagger but you were quicker. Not to mention your instant ducking to avoid his ice spear first. But to answer your question, I think it was the Valyrian steel although we cannot be sure. You are the first one to come close enough to a White Walker to be able to stab him. Before last night I had never even seen one before. So I cannot tell you how many there are out there. This whole mission was about the Free Folk proving to us these creatures even exist. I guess we can return home because our mission is accomplished.”

Jon had finished eating while they talked and was gathering his belongings. “I’ll call the dragons and scout the environment. Tormund says they will not attack by daylight but I want to know exactly where they are. I promised Davos and Sandor I’d take every precaution. The dragons can also burn all these remains.” Jon gestured at the hundreds of corpses that lay inert all around them.

“I do not suppose you can give me a ride to Castle Black?” his uncle joked but Jon heard the wistful tone.

“You would get burned uncle. Their scales are rather hot. I can only ride them because of my Targaryen blood. Even their fire doesn’t burn me. I can’t take you with me, I’m sorry.” He left their little camping space and searched for a spot without corpses to call for his dragons.

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The next two nights they saw wights in the distance but not many and they did not come under attack. Jon had used the daylight to scout the far North. He had seen thousands of wights on the march. Different groups in different locations but all of them bound for a central point. It looked like the enemy was regrouping somewhere in the far north. The good news was that they were travelling slowly and the gathering place was in the opposite direction from any known settlement of the Free Folk. Jon had marked all the locations he had seen them on the map he got from his Targaryen uncle. The fact that they were gathering probably meant they were planning an all-out attack next time. Their eventual target could be anything, a large settlement of the Free Folk or one of the castles along the Wall. Who knew what drove these strange creatures. It was certainly possible that the army of the dead would try to get past the Wall and attack the Seven Kingdoms?

Jon left them near the end of the second night. He would fly high over the Wall while it was still dark and drop a message wrapped around a stone to let the Night’s Watch know that Ed Tollet and Benjen Stark were still alive and on their way back. If he wanted to reach Sea Dragon Point later that day there was no time to stop at Castle Black and visit Maester Aemon. Orell had forecasted a cloudy day. The man had taken a liking to his fellow skinchanger. He had explained he could feel the weather change deep in his bones and was often right in his weather predictions. Jon had expressed his thanks and expressed his hope to meet him again soon.

Before he flew off, he promised his uncle and Tormund he would be back and asked Benjen and
Tormund to make arrangements for a meeting near Castle Black between all parties a moon from now so his entourage could participate as well. Tormund promised to bring Mance Rayder and the heads of the clans. Jon could hear the ‘ayes’ from the ones present, no hesitation whatsoever in their voices. Benjen Stark would make sure that the Night’s Watch was adequately represented at the meeting. Jon climbed on the back of his dragon, shouted “keep yourselves safe so I will see you all soon,” and flew off, acknowledging the eagle that accompanied him the first part of the way with a nod and a smile.

All the way back, Jon tried to think of the best way to convince his councillors to postpone their cause and deal with the situation at the Wall first. Jon knew the plan he had in mind would ask a lot of their resources and they needed to deal with Dragonstone as well. He would not postpone that campaign and loose the perfect opportunity to take possession of the island without much resistance perhaps even none at all.

He arrived mid-afternoon. As soon as he climbed of Rhaegal, Ghost came running up to him. His direwolf’s greeting was heart-warming. Jon indulged him knowing full well the others would not be as welcoming. He walked to the tavern Ghost glued to his side. Jon hoped they would let him take a hot bath and change his clothes before assailing him with their admonishments.

Sandor stood outside leaning against a wall and was the first to see him arrive. “Your uncle okay?”

Jon didn’t mind he didn’t get a greeting first. He appreciated Sandor’s concern for Benjen Stark. “He is now.” A tired smile graced Jon’s face. “Nice to see you, Sandor.”

“You as well boy.” Sandor moved closer but stopped. “You smell boy. Let’s get you in through the back entrance. With a bit of luck you can have sufficient time to clean up before they descend on you. I’ll try to prepare them. They are having another strategy meeting. I’ve lost count of how many they’ve held since you left.”

“Thanks Sandor. Is everyone all right?” Jon asked while they circled the building.

“Define all right. If you mean are they alive and healthy, the fucking answer is yes. If you ask if they are calm and happy, what the fuck did you expect?” He opened the door and let Jon enter. He followed him and continued the conversation in a whisper so as not to give away their presence. “I do not think Ser Gerold slept more than a few hours since you left. Everyone’s appetite has suffered, except for the boys. Somehow they think you can take on anything and everything and will show up without a scratch when you’ve finished doing your thing. That last sentence is a quote of Gendry.”

They had reached the top of the stairs. Jon smiled at Sandor. “Thanks for everything Sandor. Will you send up a servant with some hot water please? And wait a bit before you break the news of my return downstairs.”

“You’ve got it my Prince.” He said the last two words in a teasing tone. “I can’t wait to hear of your reckless adventures. I’m sure you will shock the whole fucking room.” Sandor left.

“You have no idea.” Jon mumbled to himself and undressed in order to take a very welcome hot bath.

When he entered the common room Sam was the first to rise from his chair and embrace him, Gendry was quick to follow Sam’s lead. “We were so relieved when Sandor told us you had arrived safe and well.” Sam voiced the thought
and Gendry nodded, clearly feeling the same. Jon eagerly returned their hugs but did not speak a word. He turned to confront Davos and his loyal Kingsguards.

Davos didn’t hesitate and followed his friends’ example by embracing him tightly. “I was so worried. Glad to have you back son.” He whispered in his ear.

A tense silence ensued. Jon was determined to wait it out and tried not to cringe at the stern look of Ser Gerold. He fervently hoped the knight would come around. He loved him and wanted his approbation. He really needed him to understand his point of view.

Jon braced himself when he saw Ser Gerold approach. The knight surprised him however when he dropped the stern act and Jon got pulled against a lean body. “Don’t every do that to us again, my Prince. At the very least warn us and say a proper goodbye.” At Jon’s nod the tension seemed to leave the room. Ser Arthur, Ser Barristan and Ser Oswell were glad they could hug Jon without censure from their Lord Commander. Sandor looked at the scene and just grinned at Jon. Jon smiled back at him over Ser Oswell’s shoulder.

“How have you eaten anything lately?” Davos practical as always had asked the cook to prepare a plate.

“Not since yesterday evening,” Jon replied. He sat down and accepted the food gratefully. Sam poured him a cup of ale. Jon looked at Davos. “Perhaps you can start to fill me in on the situation here? Have any ravens come in with more news? I reckon Sandor has told you my uncle is okay?” Jon was relieved the ice was broken and they could move on for now. He knew he would probably get a scolding or two in private but nothing could take away the treasured feeling their warm welcome had provided.

“Yes he did.” Davos answered. Well, here everything is ready to depart for the Driftmark. All of the messages have been sent. If all is well the first ship is on its way to Dragonstone as we speak. It is still too early for replies from Winterfell, Kingslanding or any of our other allies. There is one message I didn’t open though.” He reached into his pocket and handed Jon a sealed scroll. “It is from Princess Daenerys.” While Jon studied the small item with an absent expression on his face, Davos turned toward Ser Gerold. “Anything else you would like to add Ser Gerold?” Jon shifted his attention from the scroll in his hand back to the meeting.

“Yes, the messages to ready the other ships have been sent. We will have to use part of the war fund Lord Eddard Stark has left at the Driftmark for us. Ser Arthur has assured me it will be more than sufficient and can be replenished if necessary. Ser Arthur just smiled mysteriously. “We still need to hear from Lord Manderly but I’m sure he is glad he can finally start helping us. No sightings of Ironborn ships here. King Robert is still more than a sennight away from Winterfell.”

“You forgot to mention the message from Lord Reed,” Ser Barristan remarked.

“Tell me.” Jon urged always glad to receive the useful and intriguing information his interim foster father offered from time to time. “I have long been expecting another bombshell from him.”

“Better read it yourself my Prince.” Ser Gerold said. “I hope you can make sense of his cryptic words. As far as I understand it he urges us to go to Dragonstone and we should not be deterred by a simultaneous situation, we must believe our Prince capable of handling both.” All eyes turned to Jon who sighed. Ser Gerold resumed “There was a warning for Winterfell in there as well. Danger lurks up high. As long as the Stag is in the North, a Wolf should never wander alone. He closed by stating that when the Stag leaves, the pups can prevent disaster by keeping the pack together.” All eyes were on Jon now who had accepted the little scroll from Davos. He was reading the short
message his brows furled in concentration. “The only risky thing high up in Winterfell I can think of is young Brandon Stark scaling the walls and risking falling to his death. Every message I get from the Starks describes one or other antic of Bran. Lately he climbed to the very top of the old Tower. It could be something else but it will do no harm if I send a raven to Winterfell and I advise them to supervise Bran. At least they should limit his climbing activities while King Robert is there. The last bit is clearer. It is a warning not to split the Stark siblings up when uncle Ned leaves for Kingslanding. Since taking them all is not really an option as Robb needs to stay behind to rule the North in his father’s stead, uncle Ned should leave the children at Winterfell. Lady Catelyn won’t like that. It means she will probably not be allowed to follow Ned to Kingslanding.”

He put the scroll down and looked at Davos. “I hope it doesn’t mean anything else than that.”

“You already made more sense of it than us, my Prince.” Davos praised him.

“And what about the simultaneous situation, my Prince?” Ser Gerold had even gotten more apprehensive when Jon had jumped straight to the last part of the message first. He had not missed his Prince’s sigh and his dark expression when he had mentioned the first statement of Lord Reed.

Jon contemplated his pint of ale. ‘Where to start?’ he mused. He looked at Davos and Sandor silently pleading with them to support him. He turned his head and saw Sam and Gendry doing their utmost to stay inconspicuous. They were clearly hoping they would be allowed to stay in the room if they didn’t draw attention to themselves.

“Perhaps I should start by telling you what happened on my trip north. I hope you will believe what I have to tell you, even if I talk about killing an ice monster.”

Jon then proceeded to give a detailed description of everything that had happened from the very moment he climbed on Rhaegal’s back and left Sea Dragon Point. He restrained himself from using a smug tone when he told them how he left the Night’s Watch clueless of his mode of transportation. He emphasised how dire the situation of his uncle Benjen and his companions had been when he found them. He concluded his long monologue with his promise to help the Free Folk.

An eerie silence ensued. Davos was deep in thought. Ser Gerold looked out of his depth. The others just sat there not knowing if they believed everything they had heard.

The boys were whispering in their corner. Jon heard them mention the words White Walker several times.

“Can I tell you what I think we should do?” he ventured. “That way you can analyse it amongst yourselves later when I rest a bit and we can discuss strategies tomorrow.

“You have a fucking plan?” Sandor asked? “First years of doing nothing and now we are in open conflict with coward Krakens, you want to start to invade Westeros and kill thousands of deadfuckers north of the Wall all at the same time? Do not hesitate now for fucks sake. I am all ears.”

“Well it is simple really.” Jon tried to start with the obvious. “We still move on Dragonstone exactly as planned. Only I will not be going with you right away. I will concentrate on the fight here first.”

“How do you propose to take on thousands of wights and an undefined number of White Walkers?” Ser Gerold asked sceptically. “The dragons can only do so much. Are you seriously asking your Kingsguard to refrain from protecting you once more?”

“I am not.” Jon tried to assure him. “And I will not be doing it alone. I’ll have the support of the combined forces of all of the clans of the Free Folk. Uncle Benjen and uncle Aemon will hopefully bring the Night’s Watch on board as well.

Our first objective should be to prevent the army of the dead growing their ranks by preying on easy
targets. The easiest way to do that would be to lead the Free Folk through the Wall into the Gift but that land belongs to the Northern Kingdom. I realise the Lords of the North would rebel not to mention the reaction of the Night’s Watch. We know from previous negotiations how divided they are on this topic.

I had hoped to have more time to guide both parties to a compromise and to persuade them the need to exist together in peace but the reality is that time is almost up. I had thought of moving the ships at Skagos and Bear Island to their respective sides of the Wall with just enough crew to sail them safely. They can be used to temporarily shelter the woman, children and elderly of the Free Folk. The Free Folk claim the dead can’t swim. The ships could stay well in sight of the shore. Some of you could travel to the Bay of Ice on board of one of our ships and join me at the Wall.”

Jon sipped from his ale. Everyone stayed silent so he continued. Our second objective is to devise an efficient battleplan. The enemy has the numbers but their foot soldiers are just mindless puppets. I intend to scout their movements and predict where they will fight us. Then, we will be ready for them. We can build trenches to set on fire and create several traps to try to get them cornered. Then we will rein fire on them. If we had access to more volcanic glass, we could hit them with a barrage of arrows outfitted with small glass tips. Many of the Free Folk are excellent archers. The dragons can attack from the air and force them in a certain direction. And as I told you, chances are that when we target their leaders, these so-called White Walkers, we take out countless wights with one kill.

Jon had spoken to all of them but studied Ser Gerold reaction in particular. “That’s the rough layout of the plan. Let us discuss the feasibility and the logistics the coming days. As I explained the dead are not ready to attack the Free Folk in full force just yet. We have time to travel to the Wall by conventional means. I had hoped that some of you would be willing to make the trip to Bear Island and accompany the fleet to the Wall, perhaps Davos and at least one of my Kingsguard? If Gendry would agree to come along, his skills could come in handy as well.

He saw Gendry look up and addressed him directly. “Only if you are willing of course. You do not need to make a decision right away. You could assist the Night’s Watch. They can use someone skilled to ameliorate the state of their weapon arsenal and help the current blacksmith to improve his meagre abilities. But your main task would be something entirely different. There are a few pieces of obsidian at the Wall, mostly daggers. I think it would be wise to melt them down and create several spearheads and arrow points so more men can be armed with the limited material at our disposition.”

Jon now turned his attention to Sam who was sitting next to Gendry. “Is it too soon Sam to ask if you have found out where we could obtain more of this volcanic glass?”

“Actually, we might already know where to look,” Sam stammered. “That is, Ser Arthur told me about some mines on Dragonstone. If he is right, there are mines containing tons of obsidian at that location. More than you’ll ever need. The problem however is the timing. I do not see how we can get there, mine it and bring it here before the army of the dead attack.” Sam looked nervous.

“Dragonstone?” Jon asked. “Ser Arthur?”

“Actually, your father showed the mines to me. They are at the beach. We could probably access them without having to occupy the entire island first. The mining will not be too difficult, at least not at first. I recall I was able to touch the material and the shards I touched were rather large. So a lot of it should be easy to reach. I reckon a few swings with a pickaxe would already provide us with enough material to make hundreds of arrow points. You should know though that your father called it dragonglass.” Ser Arthur explained happy to have come up with this solution for his Prince.
“Do not encourage him.” Ser Gerold’s newly found indulgence was not unlimited. “I will not have him fly off to Dragonstone, mine the damn things and fly back all by himself. It is too dangerous.”

Sam scraped his throat.
“What is it Sam? You have a better idea here?” Davos encouraged the timid youth to speak up.

Sam swallowed at first but then straightened his back and ventured “What if we send a raven and let some loyal people at Dragonstone start mining the volcanic glass immediately? By the time they have a fair amount they can load it onto one of our ships. Let’s send an additional ship from the Driftmark to Dragonstone under the guise of a trading mission. Said ship would only need to transport the material the short distance to the Driftmark. Letting Jon pick up a first batch at the Driftmark where people know and love him will not be that risky. If he can transport enough of it then Gendry can get started. The rest can be sent by ship to the Wall where Jon can perhaps pick some of it up at the shore should Gendry have already finished his work on the first batch. I reckon it will take some time to transport it over land to Castle Black. We should as for the assistance of the Night’s Watch.”

Ser Gerold was still debating timing issues when Davos nodded “Thank you Sam. That could work. We do not lose anything by sending the raven to Dragonstone today. We still have time to discuss Jon’s exact involvement in all this.” He looked at Ser Arthur. “Who can we contact at Dragonstone? If we decide to do this, we better send a raven as soon as possible.”

“I agree. That part of the plan is urgent. Give me time to assess the rest of it before sending Jon off.” Ser Gerold was quick to intervene not liking the image of his Prince crossing half of Westeros on his own.

Ser Arthur first answered Davos’ question. “I’ll give you some names when we’re done here, Davos.”

Then he raised a new topic. “We are only concentrating on the dragonglass but hasn’t Jon proven there is another way of destroying these creatures?” He paused strategically and relished the fact that he had everyone guessing. Only Jon smiled knowingly but let the knight have his moment.

No one spoke up so Ser Arthur explained. “Do you think my sword will prove as effective as Blackfyre? Do we know of any Valyrian steel weapons we could loan?”

“Didn’t you tell us that Jeor Mormont has a sword made of Valyrian Steel?” Ser Oswell spoke up clearly excited to hear of another means to destroy this unusual enemy.

“Yes, Longclaw it is called. That’s certainly a possibility.” Jon affirmed. “There is Ice at Winterfell but that is not an option with King Robert arriving there soon.”

“My father has one too,” Sam offered but it is in the Reach and he is not likely to give it up.

“Do you really think it will be necessary to evacuate the Free Folk?” Ser Gerold asked already analysing the next phase of Jon’s proposed tactic.

“Perhaps not if the Night’s Watch cooperates, then there will be other options. A lot hinges on the troop movements of the army of the dead though.” Jon reasoned. “If they corner them close to the shores, our ships will be their only chance at survival.” Jon watched Ser Gerold from the corner of his eye. The man looked pale and worried.

A silence fell over the room. Gendry left their corner and approached Jon. “I will go to the Wall Jon.” He said calmly. “I’d be happy to do that for you. You only had to ask.”
“Thanks Gendry. Your presence will make a big difference.”
He yawned and rubbed his forehead. “Do you mind if I leave you for a bit. I have not had much
opportunity to sleep these last few days. I would be grateful if you would already send out the
messages to Dragonstone, Skagos and Bear Island. If someone can give me some writing material I’ll
write a short message to Maester Aemon to let him know I have arrived safely before I retire.”

“I can do that for you.” Sam was quick to help his friend. “Just let me know what I need to say. I’ll
write it in code so you can go and rest now. Let us go to your room. You can dictate your message
for Maester Aemon from your bed.”

Before Ser Gerold could stop them to ask a few more questions Ser Barristan intervened. “Leave him
be for now. Can’t you see the poor boy is almost asleep on his feet? You can have your precious
strategy meeting after supper or tomorrow or both.” He opened the door to help the two boys escape.

In his room Jon immediately settled himself on his bed.
“Sam before we get to the message, do you realise that once you are at the Driftmark you can start to
prepare for your apprenticeship at the citadel? In less than a moon everything with your father should
be settled. When we say goodbye here, it may well be for some time. Chances are slim I will make it
to Dragonstone before you leave for Oldtown.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” Sam replied his voice hoarse. “Anything can happen between now
and then. Besides we will find a way to communicate, you promised me earlier.”

Jon squeezed his hand. “Then let’s start with the message Sam. We also need to ask the citadel to
send a new Maester to the Wall immediately. Who do you suppose would have the greatest impact
on the members of the order? I was shocked to see how frail uncle Aemon has become. How can
those learned minds in Oldtown not realise he has celebrated more than a hundred namedays? It is
not right that he should still bear so much responsibility. We would not be stretching the truth an
awful lot if we were to tell them he is dying.”

“I think they lack a volunteer and do not like to force a Maester to live his entire life in exile at the
Wall. But to answer your question, you could ask Eddard Stark as Warden of the North to write it.
He gets full reports on the situation at the Wall from his brother, the official liaison doesn’t he?”

“Great idea, you can draft that one yourself so uncle Ned will only need to sign it. Now for the other
one,” Jon started to dictate and Sam diligently wrote everything down. It was like a glimpse into the
future, Jon and his Maester sending out royal instructions.

When Jon’s eyes followed Sam’s silhouette leaving his room he noticed Ser Oswell had taken up
guard. He acknowledged the man with a nod before Sam shut his door.

Jon took up a more comfortable position on his bed and retrieved the message from Dany. His tired
mind had difficulty to decipher the coded message. When he had finished reading it, her words
hadn’t lifted his spirits as he had hoped. Usually her messages had the tendency to make him smile
but this one left him feeling angry, guilty and confused. She had been attacked by a suitor and a
stranger had come to her rescue. The only thing that made him feel a little bit better was the
realisation that Ser Barristan was as good as on his way to fetch her. If only it could have been
sooner. He envied Khal Drogo the role of her saviour. It should have been him. He was her
designated protector.
Downstairs Ser Gerold summoned Davos, Ser Arthur, Ser Barristan and Sandor Clegane to discuss the best way to go forward.

“Sandor, do you reckon you will be able to make a difference at the Wall? Can you assure me you will be able to fight when one of the most used weapons over there will be fire?”

Sandor looked conflicted. “I would really like to help kill uh I mean destroy those dead fuckers. I know for a fact that I will be much better at communicating with a Tormund Giantsbane and the likes than any of you. You all heard Jon’s description. I am fairly sure that is the main reason you are asking me to accompany our Prince.”

Ser Gerold nodded. “That and the knowledge that you are a capable commander on the ground. I have seen how efficiently you organised the combined defences at the Stony Shore. You are also a formidable fighter and just as much as all of us here you’ve proven you are willing to do anything to protect our Prince. But may I remind you that you didn’t answer my question? Will the fire pose a problem?”

“I am confident I can work around it. The fire I mean. With the right motivation….,” he swallowed but then continued as if making a resolution. “It is high time I conquer this anyway. I promise I will not let you down and I formally volunteer to go on this mission.”

Ser Gerold returned his stare but didn’t respond. He now focused his attention on Ser Arthur. “Has your sword arm completely healed? Are you ready for battle?”

“I am almost back to my normal fighting level. And I still have the extra time needed to reach the Wall by sea not to mention the journey over land to Castle Black. You saw me training yesterday. I will be okay. Consider me a volunteer as well.” A look of mutual resolve passed between him and Sandor.

Ser Gerold promised to let them know his decision soon. He pre-empted Ser Barristan’s objection by telling him he was well aware his Prince had another task for him. Then he moved on to discuss logistics.

Afterwards, only Davos and Ser Gerold lingered in the room.

“I liked it better when he did not know who he was. Everything was so simple then.” Ser Gerold told Davos. “How do you really feel about shifting our focus from our long time goal to this dead people and White Walker emergency?”

“I think our Prince is doing the right thing. He is not doing this for personal gain, Ser Gerold. I am inclined to believe he will be doing the realm an even bigger service by defeating the dead than by deposing King Robert.”

At the knight’s questioning frown he explained. “Can you imagine how big the army of the dead would get if they could absorb all of the Wildlings into their ranks. The Night’s Watch wouldn’t stand a chance against an army of at least a hundred thousand strong. Then the dead would simply have to open the gates of Castle Black and they could swarm Westeros. Everyone would be dead before they even recognised what attacked them. I want to accompany our Prince to the Wall as well but will abide by his decision.”
Ser Arthur and Ser Barristan were conspiring in the corner. At Ser Gerold’s admonishing look Ser Arthur spoke up to explain why they were whispering together. “We both believe there is a prophecy about this war. Prince Rhaegar was obsessed by it. He once told me the northern tale of The Long Night and the Essosi prophesy of Azor Ahai were linked somehow. Have you never heard him mention it? He believed the Targaryens would play a role in protecting the realm from the Long Night. He honestly considered he himself could play a major part. The famous Prince Who Was Promised. Shortly before he died he was convinced the prophesized Prince would come from his bloodline. Do you not see? Jon might possibly be this Prince Who Was Promised. Perhaps he is destined to fight this war and we should all help him instead of dissuading him. Westeros can wait. If he does not do this then Westeros may well be doomed and conquering it will become meaningless.”

“I will need more information before I can wrap my mind around this.” Ser Gerold told them. He felt a headache coming up. When had things started to become so convoluted? Only a moon ago it seemed like their slow scheming would reach a swift and peaceful conclusion. Now they were talking about ice monsters, dead people and prophesies.

“Sam, can you tell me the book version of the tale of the Long Night? Just stick to the text, no wishful thinking or speculation of what this might mean for us or our Prince please.”

Sam was only too happy to oblige. They ordered supper and Sam told them all he had read about The Long Night and the tale of Azor Ahai.

Jon did not make an appearance at supper or at all that evening. He slept till morning.

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Ser Gerold ambushed his Prince after breakfast. Jon had mentioned he wanted to check on his dragons. It was the opportunity he needed to have an overdue private talk with his Prince.

“It is really important to redefine our relationship my Prince.” Ser Gerold started out as soon as they were out of sight of the settlement. Jon just nodded and let him continue.

“The Gods are my witness, I have done my utmost to adapt to you gradually taking over command and making decisions. I even congratulated myself convinced that everything was working out and then you pulled this stunt. Almost four days of being incommunicado, four days of being without our protection and not even a little hint of what you intended to do so we could at least advise you, if only to ease our minds.”

Jon tried to interrupt but Ser Gerold continued, clearly not ready to hear his Prince’s opinion yet.

“I took the time to meditate long and hard these last few days, my Prince. I realise my options are limited since you can just literally fly away and leave the nest if we butt heads. So we need to set up some ground rules. I will promise to hear you out every time no matter what a farfetched scheme you come up with. But you need to confide in me, in us. I will remind myself each time to accept you are the one to make the final decision. I just want you to come to us so we have the chance to offer you our insight if not our direct help. Give me, I mean us, at least a chance to influence your plans, slow you down if necessary so extra safety measures can be taken. I solemnly swear I will not confront you head on or force you to stay with us. I solemnly vow that I will abide by your final decision each and every time my King.” Ser Gerold ended his plea knelt on the ground his head bowed in submission.

“Please rise, Ser Gerold.” Whatever outcome Jon had expected from this conversation to have a
submissive Ser Gerold kneeling before him was not it. He longed for the guidance of Davos Seaworth. “I appreciate what you just said. I really do. You are the most loyal Lord Commander a King could wish. I will do my utmost to provide you with enough information to organise my safety. I only did what I did because I was afraid my uncle Benjen would not survive if I let you delay me or prevent me from going.”

Ser Gerold had gotten up while Jon talked. They resumed their walk without exchanging another word. Both were contemplating the significance of their promises. Jon was the first to get unsettled by the continued silence. He frantically searched for a topic of conversation to lighten the mood. “I’m glad to hear funds will not be a problem.” He spoke at last. “Ser Arthur has not let anything slip yet? The next time I see uncle Ned, he will have to let me know how he is almost singlehandedly financing a Targaryen restoration. Any ideas?”

“I have some my Prince. However they are just wild speculations. I could as well be telling you bedtime stories.” Ser Gerold’s demeanor betrayed his interest in the topic.

“Tell me anyway.” Jon encouraged as he watched Ser Gerold relax before his eyes. “Actually I have only three. The lame one being he inherited a secret stash of gold. You know how the noble Starks do not waste a lot of money in the North, no tournaments or feasts without a legitimate reason because ‘winter is coming’. His ancestors could have accumulated a fortune living so frugal and simple for a thousand years. The second theory is of secret mines in the North with untold riches. You know how the Northerners live isolated from the rest of the Kingdom and protect their way of life. It would not be so farfetched to learn they kept such a thing from getting out. The last one however, well that is just wishful thinking.” He looked sideways and noticed he had his Prince’s rapt attention. “Well?” Jon urged him to continue. “It is the timing of it all you know. Money stopped being a problem as soon as Tywin Lannister disappeared. Ever thought of making a connection there?” Ser Gerold’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Lannister gold? That would be hilarious.” Jon contemplated the plausibility. “It certainly would be. It is not impossible though. Think on it and hint at it when you talk to one of your Stark uncle’s next. I bet you would have more of a chance to extract information from your uncle Benjen.” “Of course! If your third theory should happen to be true, uncle Benjen could have been the one to execute uncle Ned’s plan.” “What makes you think it was uncle Ned’s plan? Something that devious? It could as well have been an accidental thing, something that popped up while they were apprehending Tywin. For all we know they found him sitting in the middle of his pile of gold trying to count how much he was worth.” Ser Gerold smiled openly now. “Or Howland Reed had a rewarding premonition?” Jon ventured more seriously. “I hadn’t considered that possibility. We make a good team my Prince.” He admitted. “A good team at spinning farfetched tales for all we know.” A wide smile finally appeared on Jon’s face as well. “We have arrived, Ser Gerold. Stay here, I will be well in sight but at a safe distance. I’m eager to get cuddled by my children.
The rest of that day was spent devising plans. After a grueling brainstorming session the night before, Ser Gerold and Davos had agreed to hold a mini council, just with Jon and the two of them. Together they would try to reach some sort of consensus with the Prince before asking for input from the others.

“I believe you when you say you and your dragons are vital to help the Free Folk to survive. I am also willing to believe it is not a possibility to postpone this fight against the dead until you have established yourself as the True King and can use the manpower and resources of the Seven Kingdoms to fight these White Walkers. I am even willing to go as far as to say that there may be a sparkle of premonition in the legend of Azor Ahai and the tale of the Long Night. But,” Ser Gerold took a deep breath.”

“You know,” Jon intervened, “Uncle Ned has this saying. “Everything that comes before the word but is horseshit.” He stopped and apologised upon seeing Davos shaking his head to convey a silent admonishment.

“Do you want me to continue, my Prince?” Ser Gerold did not look best pleased with the interruption. Jon bowed his head conveying a silent apology now.

“Before we decide to plan an all-out attack and a large scale evacuation of the Wildlings, uh Free Folk,” he corrected himself seeing Jon’s pertinent look, “is it not possible to get the enemy to retreat temporarily? Drive them back far enough, scare them, bluff, - any ideas on how to are welcome here - act in such a way that you can leave the North earlier and perhaps even catch up with us at Dragonstone. That way you can come back and finish the fight here moons, hopefully years later. It would have the added benefit to show off to the entire realm how worthy you are of the title ‘protector of the realm’ if you defeat the threat in the North after you are officially crowned King.”

“How have you arranged to travel from here to the Driftmark?” Jon asked wanting to gather more facts and at the same time stall his answer so he could think about how to respond to Ser Gerold’s suggestion.

“I had planned on travelling on horseback to White Harbour and then sail from there to the Driftmark. I reckon the entire journey will take us a moon to arrive at the Driftmark.” Ser Gerold replied and received a consenting nod from Davos.

“The sea voyage will take a bit less than three sennights if the winds are favourable.” Davos confirmed.

“You will be surprised how quickly I can get from the Wall to the Driftmark on Rhaegal’s back. My guess is it will only take two or three days. I could even travel between the two locations if the need arises.” He tried to assure the knight. Then he proceeded to tell them how quickly he had gotten from one point to another on his dragon these last few days. He described the easy relationship he had with his dragons and how safe he felt high up in the air with them. How Viserion followed them without needing extra guidance and provided extra safety during their flights.

“Do you realise I will be safer flying to Dragonstone than if I travel in your company? You should be careful. Best check with Yara Greyjoy where Euron Greyjoy and his ships are so you can avoid running into him. Sam should not travel to Oldtown if Euron plans an attack there.”

He addressed Ser Gerold in particular now. “Your suggestion of forcing the enemy to retreat only has merit if we can come up with a sound strategy to contain the dead effectively for a significant amount of time. However I am not willing to gamble with the lives of the Free Folk. I want the ships
in place anyway, whether we decide to evacuate or not. If the situation escalates due to some unforeseen circumstances, the ships will not be able to get there in time.

Jon turned to Davos. “What is your opinion, what are you thinking, Davos? How would you handle it?”

“I support your idea of moving the ships to both sides of the Wall as soon as possible. I would like to come with you to the Wall and take Ser Arthur, Sandor and Gendry with us. We could sail to Bear Island first and bring the fleet along to the west side of the Wall. Then we shall travel overland to Castle Black as swiftly as possible. Once we have arrived, we can evaluate the situation thoroughly and decide together whether it is possible to reach a safe status quo or not.”

Jon spoke up now. “I had hoped you would be willing to take command of the invasion of Dragonstone, Ser Gerold. And Davos, I like your idea and who to take along and please do include Ghost since I won’t be sailing with you. I will fly to Castle Black and save valuable time assessing the situation and devising plans with the Night’s Watch and the representatives of the Free Folk while you travel by conventional means. By the time you arrive you can look at our strategies and adjust them or come up with additional ones.”

Then he turned his head to address Ser Gerold once more. “You will have to speak with Sandor though. There will be a lot of fire involved. I really hope he can come along. I think he will be the best fit to deal with the Free Folk. We will also need to make sure Ser Arthur’s swordarm is fully functional.”

“This is one issue where we think alike, my Prince. I already talked to Sandor and Ser Arthur last night after you retired. Sandor really wants to go with you and promises he has ample motivation to overcome his fear of fire. Ser Arthur’s claims his arm will be fully healed by the time they reach Castle Black. I will check with the Maester just to be sure.”

He paused and looked beseechingly at Jon. “But my Prince, if you fly ahead of them to the Wall, that implies you will arrive there a long time before any of your Kingsguards or Ghost arrive.” Ser Gerold pointed out. “Is there no other way?”

“You can send a message to my uncle Benjen if that appeases you. He can act as a guard until the rest arrive if that eases your mind and I will have two large loyal dragons with me. I will be scouting some of the time high up in the air anyway. I promise not to take any risks and to stay high up in order to avoid possible arrows or spears. Please Ser Gerold, believe me. If you had seen what I have north of the Wall, you would understand I have no choice. I will not rest easy knowing the dead may attack women and children any night I spend feeling useless on a boat sailing slowly towards the Wall.”

“Perhaps you have a point there but we can still discuss how to keep you safe. Is there no way you could take someone with you on Rhaegal?” Ser Gerold asked.

“Supposing Rhaegal would agree, there is still the fact that his scales are rather hot to the touch. If we can find a solution for that I would do my utmost to get Rhaegal to comply.” Jon was warming up to the idea.

“What if they wrapped their legs in several trousers and furs?” Ser Gerold proposed.

“That would hinder their grip on the dragon and they would slide off.” Jon objected.

“What if we could make some kind of saddle with an enormous belt going around Rhaegal’s body?”
“Again I would have to get Rhaegal to comply. I cannot help but think it would be uneasy for him. I need to think some more on this and I will consult with Rhaegal when I visit the dragons later today.”

Davos suggested reconvening later with the entire small council. Jon suggested an early supper and to hold the meeting afterwards, that way he could first organise a sparring session. He was eager for some exercise.

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The next day Ser Gerold watched Ser Arthur and Sandor Clegane accompany Jon when he visited his dragons. Gendry walked alongside Jon.

“Why would Gendry want to visit the dragons?” He asked Davos Seaworth who had joined him at the window.

“If I had to guess, I would say our Prince wants to find a way to make your idea work. He will probably ask if Gendry can come up with a means of fastening a saddle on the dragons back.” Davos saw Ser Gerold’s interested expression.

“Let us hope they find a way. It would make me sleep a lot better at night knowing Jon had one of us with him at the Wall.” He remarked.

“Perhaps there is another possibility to provide him with some protection. Do you remember Jon telling us about Ser Jaremy Rykker being Master at Arms at the Wall? Surely you know he was one of Prince Rhaegar’s loyal bannermen. He fought with him at the Trident and got sentenced to the Wall for it. I am sure he would be willing to look after our Prince for you. Perhaps he even knows of other Targaryen loyalists who got banned to the Wall and Rykker could assemble a protective detail to help protect the true heir to the Iron Throne.”

“I would feel a lot better if I knew for sure.” Ser Gerold tone sounded hopeful.

“What keeps you from writing Maester Aemon and asking him? I am sure Sam would help you with the code.” Davos suggested.

“That is an excellent idea. I will inform my Prince first though. I will not go behind his back. The only effective way we can protect him over there is with his cooperation. Thanks Davos. That is an excellent suggestion. Our Prince was right to name you Hand. Are you sure you do not want us to address you more formally?”

“Not in our tight group, later in front of the people that have to respect our King, I will have no choice. Not yet though. I like my name. Davos will do for now.”

The two men fell silent. Although they stared out of the window for a long time, neither of them took in anything they saw. Both were mulling over several of the issues they wanted to resolve before the meeting they would hold with the entire group after supper.

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Four days later, Jon watched the ships leave Sea Dragon Point and head for Bear Island. There they would join the rest of the fleet and sail to the Bay of Ice. Ser Gerold, Ser Barristan, Sam and several crew members that now fulfilled the role of houseguards would travel overland to White Harbour. They would take a road that stayed south of Winterfell. They had not packed much and would travel as fast as the horses could manage. The party was mounted and ready to depart as well but waited until they witnessed Jon mount Rhaegal and fly off with Viserion following his brother. Only when Jon was no longer visible, did Ser Gerold urge his horse forward. He was going to secure a home base for his Prince and Princess.

Interlude 14: Growing strong

The day was too hot for her to give her temper free reign. It would only result in a ridiculous headache that would linger for several days. She longed for the days she had been younger and more energetic. She watched her son’s obese body bend the frail garden chair. They were both seated in a secluded spot in one of the well-tended gardens of her domain. She had chosen a spot in the shade but the heat was still rather oppressive.

“What do you think you are doing here? Whatever could you have been thinking, leaving Kingslanding and arriving unannounced at my doorstep?” Her oaf of a son had left the capital days after the King had travelled north to those enigmatic Starks.

“Well the King left and with Arryn dead there will not be any important meetings so I decided…”

“To take a holiday?” Olenna sneered at Mace Tyrell. “Why did you not accompany our beloved King? My youngest grandson will be at Winterfell by then and you could petition the King to let him come home. As if he would be safer from scandal in the North than here in his own home. Pfff.” She opened her hand painted fan. It was a present from her granddaughter. Margaery had painted a golden Tyrell rose on a plain green fan making it the most treasured one she possessed. The soft breeze it created when she moved it cooled the sweat on her brow.

She noticed her son inhale and exhale deeply and knowing his habits she intervened before he gathered enough courage to speak.

“I’m not finished,” she admonished him further. “And if you were not smart enough to think about that plan yourself, you could at least have stayed in the capital and taken an active part in governing the city. Who will profit now, Petyr Baelish or Varys, the Lannister dwarf? It could be any other small Lord with a lick of sense who recognises a power vacuum when it presents itself.”

“But the King all but ordered me to.” Mace Tyrell was sweating even more and it was not all because of the heat.

“And you didn’t think to persuade him with promises of … I do not know some costly thing he covets or more whine or gold? For the Godssake, you practically lived with the man for years now. Haven’t you learned anything about his weaknesses? Do you even know the meaning of the word ‘manipulate’?” She exclaimed. “I should have summoned you back to the Reach and then pretended you were ill so I could send Willas in your stead as soon as he came of age. Fortunately he doesn’t take after you. He is a true diplomat that one. I sent him to Winterfell by the way. He will come home with Loras, I am sure of it. I even hope he can arrange a betrothal between us and the Starks.”
Poor Mace Tyrell could hardly follow the leaps this conversation took. He just repeated the last thing he registered regretting the stupid impression he would make beforehand. He felt really tired and the travel sickness he always suffered after a long trip had not yet abated. “Betrothal? Do you think Willas can influence the King away from betrothing Joffrey to the Starks in their own home?”

“There are several Stark children and we have several children as well Mace. Many possibilities to form couples my dear.” She explained to him in a tone she normally used to spell something out to a small child. Besides do not tell me you have not heard the recent rumours about the royal children? Perhaps it is a blessing that our dear Margaery is not yet betrothed to the Crown Prince yet. I plan to bet on several horses. I seems a new contender has entered the race.”

“A new contender?” Mace limited himself to parrot his mother’s words once more.

“Well you can be excused not to have heard of this I suppose. The rumours circulate mostly around the southern shores of the Narrow Sea. Dragons have been spotted. Several sources claim this. Some suspect they belong to the Golden Company. I however do not think so. I learned something else. Prince Quentyn Martell recently visited the Targaryen Princess in Pentos. She resisted his charms if the reports of my spies are to be believed so she might still be unattached. Imagine Mace, an unmarried Targaryen female with dragons! I still have two grandsons on the marriage market. We need to be smart about this. I have sent a tentative declaration of support her way. Forcing her didn’t work for the Dornish so I intent to profit from their mistakes and play it the other way. I left the ball in her court for now.”

“What about all the money we’ve thrown at the Baratheons?” Mace complained not in the least happy with her fast changing loyalties.

“Well if the royal children are really bastards, Lord Stannis is next in line. If he has no male heirs, and Renly is out of the picture, ... A pity Shireen is so young. But anyway, Stannis knows all too well that the royal family has had our financial backing ever since Lord Tywin Lannister disappeared without a trace. By the way I am really disappointed you have not gotten any information of his whereabouts out of any of the many Lannisters at court. Really Mace, you should try harder.” She continued her haphazard reasoning out loud. “A pity Renly is imprisoned. Loras would surely been able to persuade him to marry our Margaery. Well, best forget about that, even I cannot think about a plan to rehabilitate his sorry ass. Stannis hmm, he has no male heirs. I know he is a lot older than her but if he set that old crone of his aside, Margaery could still give him sons.”

“Stop it woman. Rewind a bit. Who are you supporting? The Baratheon crown Prince, Stannis, the Targaryen Princess with her rumoured dragons or do you want an alliance with the Starks in the North?” He dabbed his forehead with a no longer pristine looking piece of cloth.

“Have I not taught you anything at all?” his mother exclaimed shaking her head in dismay. “You plant seeds for all possibilities but only harvest the one that grows the strongest. You pull the others out as if they were weeds when they become superfluous.”

“Growing strong.” Mace quoted their houses words. “I remember, you did tell me this before, didn’t you?”

“More than once, my son. More than once.”Lady Olenna got up. “It is time I went back inside. I have things to attend to before I tutor Margaery. She at least shows the promise of a keen political mind, kind of like Willas. Those two take after me. I just need to guide her some more so she can develop her skills, grow them so to speak. That way she will be able to govern her future husband and hopefully the realm.”

She hurried along the garden path towards the beautiful palace, leaving a despondent man behind in the heat. Olenna had long noticed the sun had shifted and his chair was now flooded with golden
sunlight. The imbecile hadn’t even had the presence of mind to switch to a place in the shades.

Swiftly she strode to her favourite parlour with north east facing windows and installed herself in her usual cosy chair in the corner where she had the best view of the colourful flowerbeds. She mentally reviewed the conversation she just had with Mace. For all she had been able to intimidate her ignorant son the entire length of the conversation, she was actually quite frustrated. She had been scheming for years and nothing to show for it yet.

Somehow, she had been thwarted at almost every turn. Her spies had given her contradicting reports. The recurring theme throughout her struggles, were the unusual overtures of House Stark over the past few years. Benjen Stark had even come all the way to Highgarden twice. Oh, she had not been fooled. The man did collect what they owed the Night’s Watch but his subtle references and inquiries about her allegiances, the mention of the Targaryens in Pentos and the new trade agreements between the North and the Reach, they were all unprecedented. Not to mention such behaviour was out of character for the normally so self-sufficient Northern Kingdom. She knew about the extravagant expansion of their glass gardens. It didn’t make any sense.

Most of all she had been flabbergasted by Benjen Stark’s unconditional sharing of new gardening techniques with house Tyrell. She had been cautious and applied the revolutionary method on a small part of their fields and had been astounded that the harvest on these lands had increased by more than twenty per cent.

Events had culminated lately in Eddard Stark proposing a marriage alliance, hinting at big political changes. She had known for a fact that she was not the only one scheming to profit from the downfall of the royal children and house Lannister. But who would have suspected house Stark to enter the bid for the Iron Throne so prominently?

Perhaps I should have gone north myself was her last thought before she fell into a slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, King Robert finally arrives at Winterfell.
And we are introduced to Roose Bolton.
A royal visit -part one

Chapter Summary

The King will arrive at Winterfell more than a sennight after Robb. Roose Bolton is eying house Stark’s position in the North.

Chapter Notes

I know you many of you are waiting for Jon and Dany scenes but bear with me a little while longer. I’ll make it worth your while.

Since the main story is taking place on more than one front now, some chapters will take place simultaneously. We switch to Robb Stark arriving home. This chapter takes place approx. eight days after chapter 13-Decisions, which gives Robb just enough time to travel overland from Sea Dragon Point to Winterfell. The Boltons are their own warning. I apologise in advance for their actions and remarks, especially their sexist remarks. I will state for the record that I do not agree with them, obviously, me being a female should convince you of my sincerity.

As I mentioned before, the interludes can refer to past, present or future occurrences. I would like point out that at the end of the interlude 13 there is a fast forward of approximately two moons before Ser Barristan arrives in Pentos to escort Dany home. That encounter still needs to take place in the near future of our main storyline. In our main story, Ser Barristan is momentarily in the process of travelling from Sea Dragon Point overland to White Harbour in the company of Ser Gerold, Ser Oswell, Sam and some minor characters. If things are still unclear, you can contact me by leaving a comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Robb entered through the gates at Winterfell there was no big welcome home ceremony. Everywhere he looked he saw a flurry of activity and hardly anybody looked up from their duties. It was evident Winterfell was preparing for the imminent royal visit and the homecoming of the heir was of no significance. Well he hadn’t announced the exact date he would arrive and had sent no outriders. Still it was humbling. He swallowed, urged his horse onwards and entered the courtyard. When he turned to Edric, he noticed his friend was not deterred by the lack of attention their arrival inspired. His reaction was one of awe. The young man was turning his head left and right, visibly impressed by the size of Robb’s ancestral home and the excellent condition of the outhouses and fortifications. “You have a beautiful home Robb,” he complimented his friend. Robb smiled, Edric was right, he had a beautiful home. And just like that, the unwelcome feeling dissipated and it felt good to be home.

A stable boy approached and took the reins of their horses. While Robb and Edric dismounted, Greywind sprinted away to greet Nymeria who came running from the direction of the inner courtyard.
“Robb you are home!” Of course, Arya was not far behind her direwolf. “You brought Edric! Is Jon here too, and Gendry?” she scanned the rest of his party with excitement.

Robb hugged his little sister. “Jon had urgent business elsewhere Arya. He will come when he is able to. He promised you, didn’t he? Gendry is helping Jon, as is Sam for that matter.” He gently reminded her of her omission of Sam in her preference of Jon and Gendry. Another thing he could tease Gendry with when he next saw him.

Arya’s smile dimmed a little but her natural exuberance didn’t suffer too much. She made an awkward curtsy to greet Edric Dayne and called out “Come on! Let me introduce you to my siblings. They are still at their lessons. Sansa and I have already finished.” And without further ado she led the young men into the great hall.

Robb first spotted his mother and Sansa who were sitting at a table close to the entrance. They were embroidering a dress with the double wolf head sigil, probably one for Sansa to wear during the royal visit. Catelyn Stark was the first one to come forward. She hugged her son as if she hadn’t seen him in years and welcomed him home. Robb hugged her back reciprocating the warm welcome and promised they would speak later.

As soon as he released his mother Sansa was at his side and embraced him as well. “Welcome back brother. Mother was worried you wouldn’t be home in time for the King’s visit.”

“I reckon you were as well?” Robb smiled at his sister. She seemed to have grown even taller. “You look well Sansa. If you come to my room tonight after supper, I will give you a gift from Jon.”

“From Jon, for me?” Sansa looked astonished. Robb just nodded. Upon noticing his sister’s shy glances towards his friend, he remembered he still had to introduce Edric.

“Mother, please meet my friend Lord Edric of house Dayne, the Lord of Starfall in Dorne”

“Edric, this is my mother, the Lady of Winterfell.” Lady Catelyn curtsied. “And this is my sister lady Sansa.” Sansa curtsied as well. Robb saw his sister kept her head down but peeked through her eyelashes at Edric. He had never seen his sister this shy before. But then he remembered that his father had described her almost identical reaction to Loras Tyrell when he first arrived at Winterfell.

While Edric greeted Sansa, Lady Catelyn and Robb intercepted Bran and Rickon who had left the corner table.

“Robb, your home!” Bran shouted while his younger brother jumped Robb.

Robb took it all in stride, gave Rickon a kiss on his cheek and gently put him back on the ground. He kneeled down and gave them both a quick hug “I see Bran is still in one piece. Have you been good boys while I was away? Will I be able to reward you with an awesome sparring session? I learned a few new tricks you know.” While he got back up both started talking at the same time in an attempt to convince their older brother they had behaved themselves very well. “I’ll ask mother and if she agrees, you will have earned a present from our friend Jon. Now let me quickly introduce you to my new friend Lord Edric Dayne and then you better get back to your lessons.”

Edric still stood in the same spot where he left him. He was talking to Sansa. His sister’s cheeks had reddened and she seemed to listen with rapt attention to whatever Edric was telling her. Apparently his friend had turned on his southern charm. Robb had to admit that they made quite the picture. His sister was rather tall for her age. Her long red hear was neatly held together by a few braids in a style
that enhanced the delicate features of her Tully face. She wore a simple grey dress that accentuated her slim figure. His friend’s pale blond hair and dark blue eyes made him stand out here in the North. Edric had dressed for the occasion and wore a light purple coat over his best tunic and breeches. Loras would have a rival. Robb decided to keep a close eye on the two young men. He didn’t want his sister to get hurt. What Edric and Loras would consider innocent flirtations could easily be misunderstood for a tender regard by his rather naïve younger sister who was still in the phase of believing the romantic songs about handsome princes and valiant knights.

For now he interrupted them by presenting his younger siblings to Edric. Then Lady Catelyn ushered her youngest sons back to the table where Maester Luwin sat waiting patiently beside a big book that Robb recognised all too well. It described the ancestry of the houses of the North. Bran and Rickon went willingly. Robb’s promises had yielded the intended effect for now. They really wanted to earn that gift and the promised sparring session.

Robb quickly introduced his friend to the Maester who had been at Winterfell for as long as Robb could remember and then left the great hall with Edric. Sansa and her Mother followed them out. In the corridor they encountered Arya who was talking non-stop to Loras Tyrel and Brienne of Tarth. It was clear his youngest sister had run off to inform them of his arrival and dragged them here to welcome him home. Robb ushered them all outside so Maester Luwin’s lessons could continue without further disturbance.

Edric acted as a real gentleman and offered an arm to Sansa and Lady Catelyn. Robb walked beside Loras and Brienne. As far as he could tell, Loras Tyrell didn’t react to Sansa’s fascination with Edric Dayne. His father was probably right. Loras didn’t have any designs on his sister. The Tyrell wasted no time in asking him for a sparring session. Robb was only too happy to oblige and they set a time on the morrow. He would miss Ser Arthur’s training sessions but sparring with Loras and perhaps Lady Brienne would be a significant improvement over the obligatory bout with Theon Greyjoy. The Kraken had yet to appear and so did Robb’s father. Robb felt his chest tighten at that last thought and grew serious.

“Where’s father?” Robb asked his mother when her conversation with Edric Dayne had died down.

“He’s in his solar. He is getting more messages than ever. I hope you can help him with some of his business now that you know more about what is going on. I hardly get to see him these days and things will only get worse when the King and his entourage arrive.”

“I’ll do my best, mother. When do you expect the King?” He hoped it would not be too soon. He needed time with his father. He had a lot to tell him and even more to ask him.

“Probably in a sennight. I was getting worried you would not be here in time. It is really nice to have you home Robb. I prayed to the Gods every day to ensure your timely and safe return.” His mother hugged him once more and went back inside taking Sansa with her. They needed to find a guest room for Edric Dayne. She would have to make her excuses to the young Lord. The best rooms were all reserved. She could only allocate him a smaller one in an obscure part of the castle. Well, it couldn’t be helped.

Robb saw that Edric was talking to Loras and Brienne with Arya listening in. He made his excuses to his guest and promised to be back later. He was going to talk to his father.

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When Robb entered the solar, his father immediately got up and greeted him warmly. Robb hugged his father but then took a step backwards. He ignored his father’s offer to take a seat. Instead he reached into his pocket and handed him an unopened scroll.

“A messenger caught up with me two days after I left Jon at Sea Dragon Point. Apparently not long after my departure, they received a call for help from uncle Benjen beyond the wall.” Robb said in a neutral voice. His father accepted the scroll but didn’t blink. “You knew already that uncle Benjen was still alive? Did you receive the news enclosed in this scroll as well?” His curiosity lent a bit more humanity to his voice.

Ned took a seat and opened the message. He scanned it quickly and told Robb all he knew about this matter. “I received a message from Maester Aemon that Jon arrived at Castle Black safe and sound and we should not worry. Jon vowed not to take any risk and reassured us the two dragons can cope with the cold.”

Ned frowned as he continued. “Not worry? Easier said than done. He is my only nephew and the only thing I have left of my dear sister. Moreover, I have invested seventeen years of my life in his cause and all of that would come to nothing if he perished at the Wall. And does the young man heed my council? No, he flies about on his dragons in the open and now he just takes off to a very dangerous place and has nobody with him for protection or guidance.” He looked up at his son who still had not taken a seat. “I should not worry,” he repeated. “How do I do that?”

Robb kept his expression neutral. His eyes however studied his father without their usual warmth. “I had almost the entire length of my journey to think about this. Since there is nothing we can do at this point, it will not make a difference whether we worry or not. Also, I believe we should trust Jon. I was there and have actually seen him handle several tricky situations. He isn’t rash or reckless. He carefully considers the consequences before acting. You should trust him just as you should have trusted me, father.” Robb uttered these last words in a bitter tone.

Either his father ignored his last sentence or he hadn’t heard it. He did not look up and was still reading Davos Seaworth’s message that Robb had handed him. “Apparently, Davos writes he will be back in a few days. So we should receive a raven with more news any day now. Let’s pray to the Old Gods that Benjen and Jon both stay all right.”

He finally looked up and was taken aback by the angry expression on his son’s face. “Take a seat son? I’ll strain my neck if I have to look up at you much longer.”

Robb looked even more dismayed at his patronizing tone and started pacing the limited space. Suddenly he stopped before his father’s chair all hesitancy gone. He needed to air his grievances and he needed to do it now. “Why didn’t you warn me before I went to visit Jon? Why father? You didn’t have to tell it all. You could have prepared me a little bit. It would have made such a difference had you only explained to me how the Targaryens were falsely blamed for a lot of things by your old friend King Robert.”

He towered over his father his face now clearly showing his agony and guilt of his own actions. “I almost lost his friendship, father. I was so shocked at first. I lashed out at him. I treated him as if he was this mad Targaryen that had killed my family.”

“Keep your voice down son. I’m sure Jon didn’t …” But Robb didn’t let him finish. “That’s just it! He didn’t. He is so considerate. By comparison, he made me look like a narrow-minded, bigoted imbecile.” His emotions were running really high now. His face was flushed and he was close to tears.

His father urged him to sit down once more and waited patiently until he complied. Then he persuaded him to listen to his point of view. He told him his motivation first and foremost had always
been the safety of his family. His father then described the scene in the Tower of Joy in Dorne and his discussions with the three famous knights. He spoke at length so Robb had the time to calm down a bit.

When his father stopped talking, Robb just sat there staring into space. He came back to his senses when he heard his father repeat a question about Jon and gave a terse answer. Not in the least deterred, his father kept asking him simple questions trying to get the conversation flowing again. How Jon looked, was he healthy, can you describe the size of the dragons, how was Davos doing as Hand? Robb realised he was gently but persistently persuaded to take an active part in the conversation with his father.

Sam had once drawn his attention to Jon doing the exact same thing. How Jon had softly coaxed an unwilling conversation partner back into his good graces, simply by talking to him of inconsequential matters at first. Tarly had pointed out the exact moment where Jon had noticed that the other man had calmed down enough and was once more willing to listen to him. Robb had witnessed how Jon started to say all the right things and how he had completely reversed the man’s initial refusal. Now he realised his father was using the same amazing ‘people skills’ of Jon as Sam had jokingly called the gentle manipulation.

He decided however in this case it was in his own interest to make peace with his father and started to speak freely about everything he had learned these past few sennights. He also addressed the letter from his mother containing the ridiculous marriage proposal from house Frey. His father confirmed Robb’s suspicion that Littlefinger was trying to manipulate them and was using Lady Catelyn to do just that. Their similar conclusion further cemented the tentatively restored father and son relationship.

Robb was taken aback however when his father brought up a serious betrothal proposal. “Lord Manderly is here for the King’s visit and I remember you liked Wylla very much the last time you met her. Manderly tells me his daughter often talks about you and hasn’t looked at another man since. I think it is an excellent idea seeing how house Manderly is an important and prosperous northern house. I am drawing up a settlement. You can read the draft if you want.”

Robb took a deep breath. “Father, isn’t this a bit hasty?”

“Son?” His father looked surprised. Clearly he had expected Robb to be happy with this choice of bride for him. “I have chosen her with care amongst dozens of candidates. She is an excellent choice and you like each other.”

“Is it true you have sworn absolute fealty to Jon as the True King of the Seven Kingdoms when he had barely celebrated his twelfth nameday?” Robb tried to get him to understand where this was going.

His father frowned slightly. “Yes I did. But that was just the public declaration of a much earlier commitment I made the moment we decided Jon’s fate in that tower seventeen years ago. Why do you bring that up now?”

“Hasn’t it occurred to you that by swearing your oath to Jon, you will need his approval for this betrothal?”

“I see no reason why he would not approve. Lord Manderly has been a big supporter of his cause for many years now.” His father didn’t understand Robb’s reluctance.

“What if Jon needs me to marry for political gain? Say I can buy him a Kingdom by marrying, I don’t know, perhaps the Princess Arianne, Margaery Tyrell, Shireen Baratheon, Yara Greyjoy, some Lady of the Vale, or anyone else for that matter?”
His father’s eyes narrowed. “You have discussed this with him?”

“No as such. It could have come up though that hypothetically he could have the last word when it came to betrothals of people that owe him fealty.”

“Came up how?” His father’s tone was accusing now.

“It came up when I told him of mother’s ridiculous idea that I should marry a Frey. He only said it to reassure me and then dropped the subject.” Robb stood firm and defended his cousin. “But that doesn’t make it any less true. You do realise that at the very least you have to inform him of your intentions and wait for his reaction?”

His father didn’t respond at first. He stood up, put another log on the fire and watched how the wood slowly started to catch fire. Finally his eyes left the hypnotising flames of the blazing fire and he turned back to face his son. Robb detected the exact moment his father decided to open up to him by the way he relaxed his shoulders.

“It still is a strange concept,” his father sighed and sat back down. “At first there was this tiny baby we needed to protect, and then there was this promising boy who listened to my every word. But recently, his letters have become more confident. The last one was filled with orders I had to carry out. It seems his so called ‘rite of passage journey’ he insisted on has done him a world of good. And even though I am proud of how he is starting to take up is rightful role, that doesn’t mean I do not have trouble getting used to this new world order. For years my word was law here in the North. King Robert hardly ever tried to get me to do something and if he did, I ignored him most of the time.”

He paused and studied his son. “You may have a point there. I will inform Jon of my intentions. In return however, I want you to be truthful with me. What is the real reason you object to this betrothal? Did you and Wylla have a falling out?”

“We did not. You should know there was nothing serious between us to begin with. It was just a passing boy’s crush. There are other things going on right now that are more important.” Rob sighd when he saw his father’s disappointed face. He needed to make his father understand how he really felt about the whole betrothal issue. “If I am completely truthful, I do not wish to marry yet. I’m not ready to commit to anyone. And I fervently wish I can marry someone I can at least respect and hopefully like somewhat. Wylla was just a silly infatuated girl that could hardly string two sensible words together. We didn’t share a single meaningful conversation.”

“We all have to do our duty Robb. But I will consider your words and at least stall the negotiations. I can always use the King’s visit as an excuse.” His father’s voice sounded weary.

Robby wondered whose idea the betrothal was. Perhaps not Lord Manderly but his father himself had made the first move. That would really put him in an awkward position.

“Why not tell him the truth Father? Lord Manderly knows your allegiance is to Jon, our True King. He happens to be one of the few people you can be straightforward with. You seem to get stuck in your deceiving mode sometimes.” Robb couldn’t help voicing a bit of his lingering resentment for being kept in the dark for so long. He stood up and gave his father along serious look before leaving the solar without uttering another word.

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After supper he brought his siblings to his room and gave them Jon’s gifts. Rickon hardly remembered Jon but accepted his present with as much delight as the others. He received a beautiful story book. Each page had four different drawings depicting several animals on some sort of journey. A few animals belonged to species that Rickon had never heard of, not even in the stories old Nan told him sometimes. The text below each picture was written in the common tongue and repeated once more in High Valyrian. It was an enticing way to tell a story. It looked handmade.

“Jon made this book himself.” Robb confirmed when the exclamations had died down. “Be careful with it and allow your siblings the opportunity to read it some time. It is yours though.”

Rickon pressed the book close to his chest. He looked at Robb with his big Stark eyes. “I will take extra good care of it Robb, I promise.”

Bran received a package with iron tools, some thick rope and leather belts. He looked at Robb a question in his eyes. “These are devices that can help you when you climb.” He showed his little brother the drawings Jon had included that depicted step by step how to fix the belts around his body and how to embed the iron pieces in the wall and attach his leather harness with the rope to these pieces. They will help keep you safe when you climb. Not only will they provide an extra foothold, they will also prevent you from falling all the way down if ever you happen to slip up. Best show these to father first. He can help you cope with mother’s reaction,” he warned his little brother who looked like he wanted to run off and try them out at once.

Now it was Sansa’s turn. Robb handed her a parcel wrapped in brown paper. He smiled when he heard her gasp. When she removed the paper it revealed a large piece of exquisite woven fabric, enough to make a beautiful dress. The material was thick enough to keep her warm when winter came. She couldn’t tell what colour it was exactly. Was it blue or was it green? It changed when the light touched it, just like the colour of the sea. Robb saw she was moved to tears. He waited until he had her attention and showed her that on the inside of the wrapping paper someone had drawn the designs for two evening dresses. “Jon got these from a friend at court. He claims these represent the latest fashion.” Sansa just hugged her brother unable to utter a single word.

He then showed his siblings the dagger Jon had gifted him and reminded Arya that she had already received her present. Arya nodded and proclaimed that even if Jon had given them beautiful things, her present was without a doubt the most awesome of them all. Robb stopped everyone’s protestations by ordering them to write a thank you letter to their thoughtful and generous friend.

***

The next morning, Robb and Edric joined the others in the training yard where the daily training sessions were about to begin. At first Robb just watched from the side lines. He was surprised by Arya’s progress. When he saw the young girl fight Lady Brienne he noticed his little sister had developed an entirely different fighting style. Arya was quick on her feet and seemed to dance around her opponent. She had been taught moves that fitted her physique perfectly. He made a mental note to praise Lady Brienne for her excellent teaching skills later.

Then Loras stepped forward and asked Robb to spar with him. Robb was happy to oblige and took his starting position his dulled training sword at the ready. Both boys started out tentatively at first evaluating the other’s improvements since their previous sparring session in the Riverlands, but soon the fight grew more intense. Arya and Edric shouted encouragements and slowly a crowd gathered to watch the engaging spectacle. In the end Robb had to admit defeat. He had won several bouts but
Loras had shown superior technique and gotten Robb to wield more often as he had been defeated. He swallowed his pride with some difficulty and shook the Tyrell’s hand promising him to make it more difficult for him on the morrow. He was a bit mollified when he saw that Edric had trouble keeping Lady Brienne of Tarth at bay. He used the opportunity to study every tactic she used. He was determined to do better and beat them the next time. He had neglected his training lately and the few sparring sessions he had attended at the Stony Shore with Jon and his guards, they had concentrated on battling in formation which meant that during these sessions he had always had at least one wingman defend his weaker side.

It was Arya who broke his contemplation by pointing out how Sansa was staring with lovesick eyes at Edric. Robb just shook his head and told her to keep her voice down. It was not nice to put her sister on the spot like that. Sansa had turned red and whispered she was just admiring how well he fought.

“Pffft,” Arya responded. Then you do not understand a thing about swordsmanship. Lady Brienne fights much better.” It looked however the Gods had decided to take Sansa’s side. Arya had not yet finished her sentence when Edric made Lady Brienne stumble and yield. It was however the only bout he would win against her that day.

The crowd dispersed when Eddard Stark appeared on the rampart overlooking the training yard. “Please continue your training.” He waved his hand then addressed his son. “Robb, can you join me in my solar please. I have received some messages and you will soon need to make yourself presentable to stand by my side when I greet new guests. Lord Bolton and Lord Umber have sent outriders to warn us of their arrival.”

The first message his father showed him was from Sea Dragon Point written by his cousin. Lord Stark discussed the content with him without holding back. Robb’s first emotion was one of relief when Jon started his message by telling them uncle Benjen was okay and would arrive at Castle Black soon. But then just as his father, Robb was taken aback by the speed of Jon’s plans to invade Dragonstone. The Rebellion would start soon now. Nothing had prepared Robb however for the intense but mixed feelings that flooded him when it dawned on him that he was a fellow conspirator in this Rebellion and a traitor to King Baratheon. On the one hand he felt proud and elated that he was accepted and in the know, on the other head he felt nervous and scared. His heart beat so hard he wondered whether his father could hear it. He looked up and noticed the powerful Lord of Winterfell looked out of his depth and somewhat alarmed as well. The next few moons would not be dull.

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The days leading up to the royal visit Robb fell into a kind of routine. Despite the flurry of activity around the castle, his days were rather uneventful. He broke his fast with his friends, then attended the daily sparring session and was glad to see his own progress to the expense of his friends. Edric had praised him but Loras had just gritted his teeth and doubled his efforts to find new ways to beat him. After lunch he assisted his father while Loras carried out several tasks the Lord of Winterfell had assigned him. Edric either joined Loras or helped Lady Brienne who faithfully followed the younger Stark siblings in an effort to keep them out of trouble. They all dined together and played silly guessing games or told each other exaggerated tales.

Theon Greyjoy kept a low profile these days, either keeping his conversation to neutral topics or making himself scarce. He rarely appeared at training sessions stating chores kept him busy. Robb
knew it was just a flimsy excuse not to get soundly beaten each day by men younger than him. Robb relished these last few days of relative calm. He knew all too well it would not be long before things would start happening and he knew there was no guarantee that his family would stay as safe and happy as they were now throughout it all.

One morning, Robb had just started another bout with Loras Tyrell when his father made an appearance on the rampart. The Lord of Winterfell waited until he had everyone’s attention. “I suggest you all go to your rooms and make yourselves presentable. The King’s party has been spotted and will be here shortly after noon. Everyone reacted excited. For many it would be the first time they laid eyes on King Robert and the King would be bringing almost his entire royal court north. While everyone made their way to their quarters, Robb noticed the tense posture of his father whose eyes were sweeping over the courtyard studying everyone’s reaction. When he crossed his son’s eyes both men exchanged a grave, meaningful look. His father subtly acknowledged him with a hardly perceptible nod and disappeared inside.

***

Everyone of importance stood lined up in the courtyard trying to be patient and appear at ease. Finally they could hear the noise of the royal caravan approaching the inner courtyard. Lord Stark surveyed the receiving lines. His wife stood at his right side in all her finery, her hair for once arranged in a southern style. He saw she had done something similar to both his daughters’ hairdo, but while the style complemented the beautiful face of Sansa, Arya looked uncomfortable and had already managed to ruin the elaborate patterns of her braids. Robb stood upright a focussed expression on his face. Ned had noticed that he had helped Bran and Rickon get ready earlier. Even now his heir encouraged his younger siblings to stand straight with their eyes forward and keep the line straight. Ned was proud of him, he was proud of all his children.

His eyes moved further down the line. Loras Tyrell stood out in all his finery. Eddard Stark had stifled a laugh when he saw him. The northern Lords would never take him serious like this. His bannermen dressed according to weather and functionality. The lad clearly hadn’t considered the weather when he put on his thin flowery coat. The wind blew from the north today. He had seen the young man shiver more than once already. Lady Brienne stood stiffly next to him. Edric Dayne completed that end of the first line.

Ned turned left to survey the other half of the front row. The more important Lords of the North were all present. Even Lord Roose Bolton had made the trip. Upon his arrival their greeting had been cold. Ned had insisted upon a truce for the duration of the King’s visit. Roose Bolton had only agreed on the assumption that he would not leave Winterfell before all their matters between them were resolved. Ned finished reviewing the lines. Behind him stood Theon Greyjoy next to his Master at Arms and Maester Luwin. Several minor lords, loyal houseguards and the rest of their household completed the receiving party.

The gates opened and the large caravan entered the courtyard of Winterfell. He squeezed his wife’s hand and gave her an encouraging smile. She nodded her head at him. He knew she would play her role to perfection. She often talked about visiting Kingslanding now and how she longed to mingle among royalty and the finest lords and knights of the realm. Ned turned his attention back toward King Robert. His mind was made up. He had promised himself to keep his guilt to a minimum. He would just do his part and serve his rightful King. You can only do right by one King and if you are
not confused as to where your loyalties lie, then your path and conscience are clear. It would become his mantra during this ordeal.

He started his mummercy by kneeling deep and bowing his head in submission when the King came through the gates. Everyone followed their Lord’s example. Ned could follow the feet of the squire that ran towards the King’s horse to help his sovereign dismount. From the corner of his eyes he noticed the King had some difficult getting of his horse. Now Robert’s feet were in front of him.

The King made a hand gesture and Ned rose back to his feet. He could hear the shuffle of everyone else once more following his lead.

“Your Grace.” He greeted his former friend trying to keep the shock from his face when he took in the bloated figure of his once so vigorous foster brother.

“Such a long time Ned. Why haven’t I seen you?”

“I have been guarding the North your Grace.” Ned replied keeping his tone neutral.

The King glimpsed at the receiving line.

“Catelyn,” he greeted. “A fine looking bunch of children my Lady.”

“I thank you your Grace.”

“Your eldest looks ready to take the world on. He’ll make a handsome northern Lord. You should get him married soon so he can start giving you grandchildren. The King surveyed the receiving line, nodded his head a few times and decided he was done with the formalities. “Come Ned, let’s visit the crypts.” Without any consideration for his queen who had just arrived at his side, he left the courtyard.”

Both women looked at each other with barely contained unease. Then Catelyn greeted her Queen according to court protocol and showed her inside.

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In the crypt, King Robert took long strides towards the spot where Lyanna’s statue stood. They were completely alone. He faced his estranged friend.

“I need you Ned. I need you in Kingslanding. Now Lord Arryn is dead, I would name you Hand of the King.”

“Your Grace,” Ned started. He had stopped. Two sculptures still separated the men from where his sister’s likeness stood.

The King had stopped as well and faced Ned. “I will not take no for an answer Ned. Your son is grown up. He can guard the North in your stead. No more excuses. I need you now more than ever.”

“Your Grace?”

“I am having nightmares Ned, every bloody night, ever since I heard the rumours of a dragon flying over the Narrow Sea. I should have killed every last one of these Targaryens”

“I heard those rumours. My informants told me it was most likely a rather small one presumably
owned by the Golden Company, not by the Targaryens in Essos. There is only one Targaryen left in
Essos anyway. The Prince Viserys perished a long time ago.”

You do not think that female incestuous dragonspawn in Essos has anything to do with that flying
dragon?” King Robert insisted.

“I’m fairly sure. My sources tell me she hardly ever leaves her small fortress and if she does it is only
on an innocent trip to a local market a few miles from her home. How could she possibly raise a
dragon let alone send it out to kill pirates on the Narrow Sea?”

“You do not reckon that dragon is a threat to us then?” King Robert looked at his friend sporting
almost the same look his children used when they needed reassurance.

“Not now anyway. If you make enemies who have enough gold to hire the Golden Company
however... But that is not the case is it? One small dragon chasing pirates is hardly a threat to
Westeros your Grace.” Ned tried to keep his face even.

“See your making your case for me. My counsellors had their doubts about you. Told me you were
locked up in the far north and didn’t involve yourself with our politics. You’re at least as well if not
better informed than they are. What’s more you have a sound mind in that head of yours and do not
panic easily. Your advice on this matter outweighs everything my council has plagued me with this lately.
I am not asking you to become my Hand. You already are Ned. You’ve attended your first official
meeting with your King. How soon can we leave for Kingslanding?”

“And antagonise my wife? She has prepared several festivities these coming days. The Lords of the
North have travelled a long way to see you. No your Grace, my second advice as your Hand is to
stay here for the prearranged two sennights.”

“Ah, now it is official. You’ve confirmed it yourself.” The King beamed from ear to ear when he
reached inside his pocket and handed Ned the famous Hand of the King’s brooch.

“Now about that betrothal between our children.”

“Better quit while you’re ahead your Grace. My daughter is far too young yet. Let’s revisit this topic
in a year or two.” To appease Robert, he fastened the brooch on his doublet.


“I’m sorry, your Grace. You get one favour from me today. Either I become your Hand or you get
your betrothal. You choose.” He kept his tone firm.

“You bloody well know what I choose. I’ll agree, for now anyway. In a year you say? You could
get me in trouble with the Tyrells but well, my Hand will solve that for me. That’s what I need a
Hand for anyway. I get you to rule my Kingdoms and solve my problems while I eat, drink and
whore my way to an early grave.” The King belly laughed.

Ned heard the manipulation of his deadline but decided to let it slide. Jon would make his move
before the year was out anyway. “Shall we return to the courtyard your Grace?”

“Don’t your Grace me when we are in private. That’s an order. And I need your advice on another
matter. What should I do with Renly?”

exclaimed feeling somewhat guilty about the younger Lord’s fate.
“No, I brought him with me. In chains, mind you. I wanted to ask you whether it would be a good idea to send him on to the Wall. You always claim the realm can use good men up there.

“I hope you do not mean to sentence him to be a lowly recruit and make him vow his life to the Night’s Watch forswearing his title. Could you not send him there as your royal emissary with special rights and benefits instead?” Ned tried to at least ease the predicament of the unfortunate brother of the King.

“Can I do that? Damn you’re a genius Ned. I do not lose face and he gets to live a decent live. He is still my brother you know.” The King sighed. “This entire matter does not sit well with me. Of course I knew he leaned that way but he had always been so careful, so discreet. When I see the Tyrell boy standing there… Best keep that lad out of my sight as much as possible Ned.”

“Consider it done. I will draw up a royal decree for your brother. You will be able to sign it soon. My brother serves at the Wall. I’ll tell him to look out for Prince Renly. He will be all right Robert. You can rest easy as far has he is concerned. And please give me leave to set him up in a room in the castle for now. I know just the place. Somewhere nobody will find him. I’ll post my houseguards and ensure he doesn’t leave but I would ask for your permission to release him from his chains.”

“The matter is your responsibility now. Do as you see fit. I’ll sign whatever you write. Come on. Let us join the others in the great hall. I am in dire need of a large pint of ale.” The King turned back without even sparing a glance for Lyanna’s statue.

Ned sighed and repeated in his head. ‘You can only do right by one King and if you are not confused about where your loyalties lie, then your path and conscience are clear.’ He followed the King he pretended to serve.

When Ned left the crypts the sunlight blinded him. He squinted and noticed King Robert standing next to his good brothers Ser Jaime and Lord Tyrion Lannister. Ned could hear the King’s booming laugh and used the opportunity to scan the courtyard for his Master at Arms. He saw the man standing in the corner talking to one of King Robert’s Kingsguards. He gestured him to come over.

“Cassel, look for Prince Renly Baratheon. He is imprisoned in one the wagons still waiting in the courtyard. I want you to take him out discreetly. Once inside, remove his chains and install him in one of the unused rooms in the east wing, best one at the end of the corridor next to the stockroom where we keep our stores for the coming winter. See that he has everything he needs, a comfortable bed regular food and drink of decent quality. I need you to post two discreet Stark houseguards and lock his door. And Cassel, treat him well, no jibes or harassment, he still is a Prince and the King’s brother. I will punish anyone who oversteps. This also includes the White cloaks or anyone in the royal caravan, no matter their status. Do I make myself clear?”

“You can count on me my Lord. Prince Renly Baratheon will have no reason to complain. I will personally see to it. And let me be one of the first to congratulate you.” Cassel’s eyes dropped to the brooch pinned on his Lord’s chest.

Ned nodded his head and expressed his thanks. Rodrik Cassel watched his Lord walk away a puzzled expression on his features. He didn’t know what to think. His Lord had not confided in him but he had gotten wind of some of the things that were going on. This royal visit however did not fit his expectations. And now Lord Stark wore the brooch of the Hand of the King. He reckoned it was the very first time in his service to house Stark that he doubted his Lord’s intentions. He would stay loyal but he was going to find a way to confront Eddard Stark in private. It was high time he knew for sure what was going on.
In the meantime Lady Catelyn had ushered the royal entourage inside. They were all enjoying the surprising warmth inside the walls of Winterfell. Food and drinks were welcomed by all.

Robb saw Lord Tyrion being interrogated by Arya and decided to let the scene play out. He frowned when he saw Prince Joffrey trying to push Sansa in a corner. His sister looked like a frightened deer. ‘Damn what was the arrogant fool telling his sister to have her that frightened so quickly. He had often heard her talk about the Crown Prince with a dreamy expression in her eyes always coming up with stories of how handsome and valiant he was. He then noticed Loras and Edric both had a thunderous expression on their faces and were following the scene as well. He decided to intervene in order to prevent his friends from doing something rash. Before he reached Sansa however, lady Brienne appeared at her side and introduced herself to the Crown Prince.

“We met already in Kingslanding, my Lady.” The Crown Prince was quick to dismiss her and continue his attentions to Sansa.

“My Prince, I believe we have not been formally introduced yet? Lord Robb of house Stark at your service.” Robb made a bow and subtly pushed his sister to the side. Lady Brienne didn’t hesitate and inserted herself between the young girl and the Prince. “And have you met my younger brothers?” He signalled Rickon and Bran who were only too willing to approach and meet a real Prince.

He saw Sansa whisper something in Lady Brienne’s ear. She looked visibly relieved. He was glad he hadn’t overstepped and that she had really been in need of rescue. Loras and Edric now joined the ladies. Robb proceeded with the introductions ignoring the sullen expression on the Crown Prince’s face. The two groups split up. Prince Joffrey was now cornered by the three sons of Eddard Stark.

“What did he do or say?” Edric whispered looking deep into Sansa’s eyes a worried frown on his face.

“Not here.” Lady Brienne admonished him. “Let’s all act normal and for the Gods sake, do not leave Lady Sansa unattended for even one instant during the entire length of his visit. I do not trust that spoiled brat for one bit.”

Sansa shivered what only made the two young men more protective of her. “We are your servants, Lady Sansa. Feel free to call on us whenever you need us.” Loras bowed and kissed her hand gallantly looking at Edric with a mocking expression in his eyes.

“I think it is time lady Sansa changed into an appropriate dress for dinner. I will accompany her of course.” Lady Brienne announced and led Sansa to the nearest entrance.

“I do not like this Loras,” Edric exclaimed with great feeling although he kept his voice low.

“Indeed, we better talk to Robb later. He can ask his father to intervene if necessary. Did you see the Hand of the King’s brooch? Jon was right. But then he always is.”

Lord Tyrion was still entertaining Arya Stark. He rather liked the spirit of the little she-wolf. Without
her noticing he had carefully interrogated her about the goings on at Winterfell. He now knew the Stark’s normal daily routines. Had heard where they kept their direwolves at night and other useful stuff. He had obliged her however to keep her suspicions at bay and had described the latest tournament at Kingslanding to her at length. More specifically how his brother Jaime Lannister had lost in the finals of the joust to Ser Arys Oakheart. He had been observing the goings on in the great hall as much as possible. His keen eyes had watched the scene between Joffrey and Sansa and he had been glad his interference had not been necessary.

Suddenly his brother was at his side. “Why can you not tell her of all my glorious victories? Did you really have to describe my biting the dust in such gruesome detail?”

Arya laughed. “Because he is smart and understands those are the stories I like the most. She took a piece of his white coat between her fingers. “How do you keep it so clean? I always wear dark clothes because I get dirty when I fight so that one can’t distinguish the dirt since they already look dirty before I start.”

“Gods girl, don’t you ever forget to breathe?” Jamie removed his coat from her fingers. “You will make it dirty if you go on like that. Have you seen me fight since I arrived here?” When he saw her shaking her head he muttered. “Well, there you have your answer.”

Arya clearly didn’t like his snobbish attitude and ran off in search of another victim to tell her stories about Kingslanding.

Tyrion looked at his brother. “Did you really have to frighten the girl away? She means no harm. She is a lively little thing.”

“I prefer Tommen and Myrcella’s attitude. They are quietly sitting over there looking at a book with little Rickon Stark. It must be a rather extraordinary book to keep Tommen’s interest for this long.”

“I see you do not include Joffrey in your praise. Did you happen to notice his abominable behaviour earlier? I think he propositioned Sansa Stark”. When he saw his brother’s sceptical expression he added, “Yes I mean that by it and she didn’t welcome his advances. To the contrary, the poor girl couldn’t get away fast enough. Apparently she has suitors enough here at Winterfell to keep her safe even if her brother beat them to it and saved the damsel in distress.”

“What exactly did the stupid boy do now?” Jaime looked exasperated.

“I saw him corner her and held onto her arm when she tried to get away. I think his words did more damage than his deeds though. She looked rather frightened.” Tyrion watched his brother’s frown grow more pronounced.

“I’ll talk to him.” He promised.

“See that you talk to that sister of ours as well. Perhaps he is just following orders from his mummy dear.” Tyrion was almost sure his sister had instigated this little scheme.

“You don’t think? All right I’ll take care of it.” He amended his sentence when he saw his brother’s critical look.

“I have to find me some more of this wine. Didn’t I tell you that Lord Stark has excellent trade relations with the Reach? He certainly serves excellent wine.” Tyrion made sure to pass near Tommen’s and Myrcella’s location to get a glimpse of the book they were still engrossed in under the watchful eye of Rickon Stark. He stopped abruptly when he heard Myrcella read something that resembled High Valyrian although her pronunciation was rather bad.
“And how is my favourite niece tonight?” Tyrion asked and tried to study the book inconspicuously.

Myrcella giggled. “I am your only niece, uncle Tyrion. I am trying to read this funny book. “Animals are speaking in different languages, see?” She showed her uncle the book but didn’t hand it to him. When Tyrion pointed at an image, she immediately withdrew the book and admonished him. “Be careful uncle, I promised Rickon I would keep it clean. It is his most precious book you see. A dear friend made it especially for him. I had to be very persuasive to be allowed to hold it for a little while.”

“She gave him a kiss on his cheek.” Tommen betrayed his sister, still disappointed he was not allowed to touch the book and had to restrict himself to look at it.

Tyrion watched Rickon turn red but the youngest Stark didn’t give in and spoke up now. “It is my book. I decided who gets to see it. And the Princess is very careful, so she may have it a bit longer. I will want it back soon though.”

“That must be a very special friend or a very special book if you are so protective of it” Tyrion was really curious now. The page he had been able to see was intriguing. The sentences written beneath the drawings were indeed translations in High Valyrian, and not just some common words. Tyrion had seen several expressions he would have had trouble translating if not for the solution being written right beneath it. Perhaps the person who wrote this was from Essos and High Valyrian was his mother tongue? He listened carefully to Rickon’s answer.

“He is but he is more Arya’s and Robb’s friend cause I was really little when he visited. Arya says he is kind of our adopted brother but I do not believe that cause I never get to see him. I wrote him a thank you note even though I can’t remember what he looks like.”

“I would treasure such a friend all the same.” Tyrion remarked and left the children to continue his search for another glass of wine. He would make sure to have another conversation with her in the coming days

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Robb gathered his sibling together before they went into supper. He had heard part of Rickon’s conversation with Lord Tyrion Lannister. He stressed once more that Jon was a special friend, as good as family but that he actually was a bit of a secret. They should not talk about him while the King was here and certainly not answer questions of the Lannisters. Jon was part of their pack and they needed to protect him. He would stay safe if nobody knew who or where he was.

When Arya told Robb in a superior tone she would never do that, Bran spoke up. “I saw you talking to the dwarf. You sure as hell told him a lot about Winterfell. And you talked to Brienne about Jon too.” He accused her.

“Bran, heed your language. He is Lord Tyrion Lannister to you. Do not call him the dwarf. If someone hears you talking like that you could get in trouble. He is the King’s good brother. Also mother would wash out your mouth with soap if she heard you use that swear word.” Robb admonished his brother.

“I did talk to Lord Tyrion and I told him exactly what I wanted to tell him, a bit of the truth that wasn’t a secret and a bit of a less accurate truth. I knew what he was about all along. I told him the
direwolves slept in a pen the entire night and he believed me. See? I am smarter than all of you.” Arya was quick to defend her actions. “And I did not reveal much to the Lady Brienne, even though she keeps asking me about Jon Celtigar all the time. I only brought him up once because I wanted her to swear her sword to Jon. I know she can be trusted Robb, I just know it.” Arya’s big eyes were fixed on Robb now a pleading look in them.

“Better let father handle that Arya. I think Jon would appreciate it if you didn’t talk about him to anyone. Can you do that for him?” While Arya nodded vigorously Robb continued to warn her.

“Arya, do be careful, Lord Tyrion is very smart. Do not think you can outsmart him. From what I know of the Lannisters, he will try to find out more about our special friend.” He turned to Rickon once more. “You are sure you didn’t mention a name?”

The little boy looked stricken as if he wasn’t sure of anything anymore. Robb crouched down and put a reassuring hand on his little brother’s shoulder. “Come now Rickon, you didn’t really do anything wrong. You just didn’t know before. If anyone asks after Jon again, persuade them to come to me with their questions. Just tell them that I am the one who knows him best.” He turned his head to his little sister. “Arya, that goes for you too, you hear?”

“I promise Robb, I will make Jon very proud.” Arya was quick to point out.

Robb smiled at her and nodded encouragingly. “I know you will, you already do.” He patted his little brother on the shoulder once more. “Come on let me fix your shirt. You have to look your best if you want to sit next to Princess Myrcella again.

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Later that night Lady Brienne, Edric Dayne, Loras Tyrell and Robb cornered Lord Eddard Stark in his solar. After explaining Sansa’s ordeal, Lady Brienne was appointed her faithful shadow for the duration of the royal visit and vowed to only leave her side when one of the others relieved her of her duties. They worked out some sort of schedule and some code words and signals. Lord Stark also doubled the guards in the corridors where the ladies slept.

They discussed a few changes in the normal order of the day at Winterfell. One of them was a temporarily suspension of the sparring lessons of his children. For the entire length of the royal visit, the training yard was off limits to anyone under the age of fifteen. Lord Stark asked them all to keep Prince Joffrey entertained during the arranged activities and as far away from the ladies as possible. Lord Stark would speak to his wife about the seating arrangements in the great hall. When they ran out of ideas, Lord Stark asked them to leave so he could finish the royal decrees he was preparing.

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The next day after breaking their fast, Edric cornered Loras when he tried to leave the great hall. “Loras, can you escort me to my room in a bit? There is something I think you need to know.” Edric had struggled with a dilemma but after talking with Lord Stark, they had decided his friend deserved to know the truth.
“Something more serious than Sansa being harassed by a conniving upstart Prince?” Loras asked bewildered by the troubled look on Edric’s face.

“Be careful, someone might overhear you. Let’s mingle for a bit. I’ll meet you in the corridor at the left exit in a short while. I’ll give you a signal before I leave and then you will wait a few moments before you join me.” Edric whispered. “I need to talk to you alone without raising suspicion.”

Loras was intrigued now. However he obeyed and went over to the opposite side of the room where Rickon was showing his book to Tyrion without another glance or word at Edric. When Loras finally left the great hall, he found Edric waiting for him and followed his friend to the east wing of the castle.

“I know we have not known each other long but I consider you my friend Loras. Will you confide in me?” Edric asked looking rather anxious.

“What exactly are you asking?” Loras got even more worried when he noticed where they were headed. “Where the hell did Lady Catelyn assign you a room, next to the servants’ quarters?”

“Well I was an unexpected guest and the royal entourage is extensive. But this location is very much related to the topic I wanted to talk to you about. Do you trust me, Loras?”

“Ask already. You are giving me the creeps. Where are we anyway?”

Edric ignored his last question. He pulled Loras in an alcove out of sight although hardly anyone ventured to this part of the castle especially at this time of day. “What is your actual relationship with Prince Renly? Will you tell me? Were the two of you lovers, or did he abuse you?” Edric whispered, his eyes taking in the shifting emotions on Loras’ face. His expression had switched from bewilderment to anger and finally to sorrow. Loras had dropped his head.

“Why do you ask this of me? Do you want to torture me?” A single tear escaped Loras’ eye and was slowly rolling down his cheek.

“I am just trying to determine if you are still interested enough to know where he is and whether it would help you to see with your own eyes that he was all right.” Edric explained. He had an inkling of what his friend was feeling but needed to be very sure.

Loras lifted his head. Hope flared up in his friend’s moist eyes and the words spilled out of him. “I love him. I do. He didn’t abuse me. I feel guilty for letting him take the fall. But he ordered me to, arguing he could not deny anything but I could still save myself. He sacrificed himself for me.” Tears now flowed freely. Edric waited patiently for Loras to regain a bit of composure.

Finally Loras wiped the tears from his face in a determined way and looked at him. ”I thought you had understood as much when you discovered me sobbing at that creek in the Riverlands. Why ask this of me now, when the King is here? Oh, do you think I should petition King Robert to show some leniency toward Prince Renly?” He frowned. “But Lord Stark asked me to keep my distance from the King and keep a low profile during the royal visit.”

“Loras, Prince Renly is here. And I mean this literally. He is right here, in a room around the corner. I have already cleared it with Lord Stark. If you want to, we are allowed to visit him.”

“Now? This instant?” Loras was glad he had been pushed against the wall. The surprise had turned his legs to jelly and he was not sure he would still be standing upright without the wall supporting him. “Renly is here? Is he okay?”

“I’ll let him tell you that himself. If things go well, I will leave the two of you alone halfway through
the visit. Just give me a clear signal so I know that both of you are okay with it.”

Loras hugged Edric. “I will never forget this Edric, ever! You can ask any service of me, anytime. I’ll even help you get some private time with Sansa if you want.”

“That’s one hell of a promise Loras. We’ll talk about that later. I might have a service to ask of you now that you mention it. As for the lovely lady Sansa, the only service we need to perform for her is to keep her company for now. Come on, wipe these tears of that handsome face of yours and make yourself presentable. There is an unsuspecting Prince close by who will be very pleased to see you. I bet he doesn’t even know you are in the North.”

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That same night long after supper, Eddard Stark joined the three boys who were talking quietly in a corner. After some time when they all agreed to retire, he gestured Loras to stay behind.

Loras instantly realised Lord Stark would bring up his lengthy visit to Prince Renly and hoped Edric had not overstepped. He silently followed Lord Stark to his solar and sat down in the chair Robb’s father pointed at.

Lord Stark didn’t keep him in suspense and came right to the point.

“I wanted to let you know what has been decided concerning Prince Renly’s future. I also want to ask you to be circumspect in your visits to him. I give you leave to see him as often as you want as long as you are not discovered. The guards I post at his door are in the know of course. They are some of my most loyal men and will not betray you to the King or anyone else for that matter.”

“My Lord, you mean to tell me you do not act on behalf of the King in this matter?” Loras’ eyes lingered on the brooch. Renly had explained at length how bad he had been treated in Kingslanding. They had starved him, mocked him, hurt him in every way they could get away with. The journey to Winterfell had been hell. Renly had also told him he had overheard his current guards speaking to each other. They had gossiped about the displeasure of the royal guards at his change in circumstances. It had become clear to him that it was on Eddard Stark’s personal orders that his treatment had changed for the better. Everyone that dared to mistreat him had been threatened with severe punishment.

Ned sighed. He had seen Loras eying his brooch. Everyone treated him differently now. He hated the damn thing already. “Let this be our little secret Lord Tyrell. One of my first actions as Hand of the King was to resolve Prince Renly’s situation. You are perhaps aware that my brother, Benjen Stark is the official liaison between the Night’s Watch and the Warden of the North. He often joins the party of the Night’s Watch that collects the taxes throughout the realm and escorts new recruits to the Wall and consequently can’t always attend to his duties here in the North. It has been decided by royal decree,” he gestured to the scroll he was currently working on, “that Prince Renly shall be the emissary of the King at the Wall with special status. At first he will not be allowed to leave the Wall, but that will soon change so he can fulfil his new duties adequately.”

Lord Stark looked directly at Loras. “Lord Edric told me of your promise to him. He releases you from it if you give me the same promise you gave my brother Benjen several moons ago. I want you to vow on your honour as a Tyrell not to reveal anything you will discover during your stay at Winterfell.”

He saw the boy’s eyes widen as he connected the dots. “You know about the three famous knights?”
He ventured keeping his voice low.

“Technically you are breaking your vow to my brother right here and now.” Lord Stark tried to keep his voice stern but knew he didn’t succeed. “I’ll give you a pass for now but realise that someone could bait you in a similar fashion and you would just have revealed something you have sworn not to.”

He took pity on the young man who looked stricken. “But to answer your question, yes it is all connected and I know about them. You are still forbidden to inform your family for now. Hopefully things will change soon. We are on the same side, you, me, my brother, Edric, Robb and the three famous knights. I can go on and include everyone you saw in the Riverlands on this list. If you trust Edric, you can trust me as well. And you can rest assured that I will do my utmost to ensure Prince Renly gets his life back as soon as possible. I have seen to it that he is not stripped of his title. For now he is just not allowed to choose where he goes next. He will not have to take the black and swear the oath of the Night’s Watch.” He had ended this speech once more stressing his part in Prince Renly’s improved faith to remind Loras that he owed them so the young Tyrell would vow to stay silent without pressing for further details first.

Loras didn’t know what to say at first. His mind was reeling. Edric was involved in some sort of secret dealings with the Starks and his friend wanted him to swear another oath to the Starks? He just thanked Lord Stark on automatic pilot and only swore his vow after being gently reminded he still hadn’t done so. He decided to find Robb and Edric as soon as he left here. He would not break his vow if he talked to them. After all, they were all on the same side as Lord Stark had just explained to him. A thought struck his mind. “Is Lady Brienne on this ‘same side’ as well?” He put an extra emphasis on the term Lord Stark had used. It was clear he did not know what ‘this same side’ meant yet.

“I hope she will be soon. But leave that to me. Do not talk to her about this yet. You can reassure her on the fate of Prince Renly however. If Prince Renly allows it, she can also visit him. But the same restrictions apply. She has to be covert and not alert the royal entourage Renly is receiving visitors. That way gossip will be kept to a minimum.

Now I really have to finish writing this royal decree. Just to be clear, there will be no official announcement of Prince Renly’s fate in court. News of this will slowly spread around as it always does but hopefully in such a fashion that it will hardly be discussed. Another scandal will take precedence. Good news is never as newsworthy as a shocking piece of gossip.

Loras bowed his head once more in thanks and left the room. He would talk to Robb and Edric some other time. Suddenly it didn’t seem that urgent anymore. For the first time in a long time he could look to at the future with hope again.

In the meanwhile Lord Stark finished writing up the royal decree. He was glad there had been no music or dancing after supper and everyone had left the common room a bit earlier than the previous nights. He still had time to deal with one more issue tonight. He planned to talk to Cassel and then he could finally retire to his bedchambers. He was lucky Rodrik Cassel was a loyal man. His Master at Arms had come directly to him with his confusing discoveries. It was time to bring him into the conspiracy.

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Catelyn Stark was tired. This was the sixth night in a row that she had put on an elaborate feast for the King and his entire entourage. This royal visit proved to be a very expensive one. When she broached the subject with her husband, Ned had told her not to worry. He said he always put money aside for occasions like this. The North had prospered these last few years. He explained that he had been able to put aside more for the last few years than his father’s yearly contribution to the winter fund the Starks always laid money aside for.

The first day of the King’s visit she had been worried to see Ned leave the crypts with the brooch fixed on his breast. The King had only needed a single conversation with Ned to convince her reticent husband. Ned however had reassured her later that night in their bedroom. He had told her he had been able to stall the King regarding the betrothal between Joffrey and Sansa. The rest were details. Catelyn still had mixed feelings about the entire business. There was a silver lining though. She was looking forward to moving to the capital. She had been a generous lover that night. Her husband was Hand of the King! Even if she knew it would not last, every lady at the royal court knew of her newly acquired status. She was the wife of the Hand of the King, the most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms except for the King. They had treated her accordingly. Catelyn had relished every single moment of her newly acquired status.

Today would be an easy day though. Almost every Lord in the royal party had left early this morning. Ned had organised a hunt that would take up the entire day. She would only need to entertain the few ladies of Cersei’s court. The men would eat out in the open around a large bonfire tonight. Cersei had excused herself stating the previous days had tired her out and she needed a day of bedrest. She had declined all offers of assistance. Her own ladies in waiting would care for her.

Catelyn’s tired eyes checked the whereabouts of her children. The weather was pleasant today and they were all outside. Robb of course had joined the hunt, Greywind at his side. She was proud of her son. On several occasions Catelyn had noticed ladies of the court of all ages following her son with their eyes when they saw him walking around the castle with Greywind at his side. She had heard them whispering behind her back that the one who would catch him as a husband would be very lucky. She focused on her search. Sansa was easy to spot. Her beautiful daughter was sitting demurely in the shades reading a book out loud. Tommen and Myrcella sat on the ground facing her and were listening closely. Some other children sat at her feet as well. Apparently Ned had persuaded the royal guard that his houseguard could watch the royal children today so the men could all enjoy the hunt and protect the King and the Crown Prince. Lady Brienne of Tarth was guarding Lady Sansa and enjoying the story she read at the same time. She spotted Arya playing with a few boys but nothing too wild. They were playing a children’s game with pebbles. Rickon was building something with his wooden toys near the bushes in the corner of the yard.

Now she only needed to locate Bran. She looked in every direction but couldn’t find him. She scanned the walls of the castle as well. ‘Seven hells’, she had promised Ned never to let him wander off alone during the royal visit. Somehow Ned had taken a premonition to heart and had ordered her to see to it her children and in particular Bran were never alone. They had to stay together and move around Winterfell accompanied by at least one sibling. She did not believe in premonitions but had thought it would do no harm to indulge him. Besides Ned hadn’t relented until she had solemnly promised him she would take care of it.

“Arya, do you know where Bran is?” She asked still looking around.

“He said he wanted to play by the old Tower.” Arya looked up to her mother.
“Is nobody with him?” her mother admonished. “You all know of father’s edict.”

“I’m sorry mother but Summer went with him and Nymeria followed in my stead. I am sure he is okay.” At her mother’s thunderous expression she jumped to her feet. “I’ll go to him now, mother. Do not worry.”

Arya ran to the old Tower. She noticed Nymeria and Summer sitting close to the building, both wolves were looking up. She followed their gaze and saw Bran had scaled the walls. He was really high up and was looking at something through the top window of the tower. Suddenly both direwolves started to growl but kept their eyes trained on Bran. She took a few steps to reach the curved wall of the tower and petted Nymeria to get her to calm down. Arya strained her neck to look up at Bran and saw someone else was up there. She immediately recognized the blond head of Jaime Lannister, the Queen’s brother that peeked out of the window. Ser Jaime scanned the environment but he failed to notice her, probably because she was standing directly beneath him. She witnessed Ser Jaime putting his hand on Bran’s chest. Bran looked down at her clearly frightened. The enormity of the situation suddenly struck her. Arya screamed for all she was worth.

Interlude 15: Our blades are sharp

Roose Bolton was studying his options. How best to use this standard invitation to Winterfell to his advantage? All bannermen of House Stark were cordially invited to attend the royal visit for its entire duration. Not a mention of a betrothal or any response to his other demands. Just a routine summons all vassal Lords had received. Or perhaps not even that, the other messages had probably contained a more cordial ending than just the formal signing of Stark’s name and the stately listing of all the coward’s titles.

He had been so confident all those years ago when the charismatic Brandon perished and the guileless Silent Wolf became Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North. Surely this was the power vacuum generations of Boltons had waited for. He had been patient and studied the situation before deciding on a course of action. And that had been a big mistake.

At first it seemed like everything was working out in his favour. Lord Eddard Stark had left Kingslanding dismayed by the necessary murder of the royal children. The boneless man didn’t understand that you had to eliminate those with a stronger claim. Roose Bolton highly respected Tywin Lannister for the way he had gone about it. He was a man after his own heart. But very predictably the honourable Stark, idiot that he was, had rejected the influence and power King Robert would surely offer his dear friend. He had retreated to the North after traipsing across the continent on a fool’s errand. Who risked so much for a useless female? Afterwards he had scrutinised Lord Stark’s initial actions as Warden of the North.

He didn’t understand why the young Lord spent so much time and money fortifying the borders of his Kingdom and even sponsored the Night’s Watch to the extent that his younger brother had no life of his own any longer. Benjen Stark neither married nor started a family. At that time he reasoned house Bolton could profit from a strengthened borders when they took over. Even after the Greyjoy Rebellion Lord Stark had not capitalised on his restored relationship with the royal family but had made a true fortress of Winterfell. Roose now suspected him of working towards an independent Northern Kingdom. Could the Silent Wolf be that devious and ambitious? Still Roose had hesitated. He had not yet been able to weaken the loyalty of the northern lords to house Stark. Eddard Stark
still had a lot of support in the North. Subtle statements about Stark wasting money for his self-glorification and taking the wrong actions to solve the Wildling problems were mostly falling on deaf ears. Finally he was making progress. He was certain that given a bit more time the Umbers and the Karstarks could be persuaded to support his ambitions, if only his bastard son could mimic a few more cruel Wildling attacks. Nevertheless, it had all been coming together much too slow for his taste.

And then, out of nowhere, he had gotten the support of an unexpected ally. They offered to help him secure the position of Warden of the North. They had promised to weaken the Warden of the North’s position by causing trouble on several fronts at once. They would shame the Lord of Winterfell in sending a small army south to help his good family in the Riverlands and would also encourage the Ironborn to attack the Stony Shore in full force. All he had to do was take some Stark children hostage and force the noble man to step down to save his kin.

Roose Bolton had slightly altered these instructions to incorporate them into his own ambitious plan. He would marry his son into house Stark and once they let their guard down and came with the entire family to the Dreadfort for a visit, he would spring the trap, guest rights be damned. They were Boltons anyway. They had their own customs and he was proud of them. Their sigil was a red flayed man upside-down on an x-shaped white cross over a field of black. Their house words were "Our Blades Are Sharp," though he preferred the more common saying ‘A naked man has few secrets; a flayed man, none.’ To have real power, people needed to fear you.

He had not dared to share his plans with his son yet. Lately he had begun to doubt the potential of his legitimate heir. Domeric was too damn honourable. Years ago the lad had begged him to be allowed to become a squire to some southern knight. The boy dreamt of becoming an honourable knight. If he didn’t know any better he would suspect his wife had lain with a Stark. His bastard Ramsay Snow on the other hand showed promise. It looked like he could be the more worthy successor. If he had recognised that earlier, he could just have switched the boys at birth and nobody would have been the wiser. Well perhaps the boy’s mother and his nurse would have known but those two useless snivellers would just have died by his hand a few years sooner.

Ramsay Snow was the real Bolton. He only needed to teach the young man a bit of restraint. At the very least he should be a bit more discreet about his penchant for cruelty. He was sure Ramsay would have been more enterprising in his endeavours to secure the beautiful Sansa. During their last encounter Domeric had hardly spoken to the girl although Roose had given him strict instructions. Granted, the girl was still fairly young at that time, but opportunities for them to meet were rare. He could at least have invented some heroic tale about a puppy he saved or something to make the mindless girl admire him.

Perhaps he should give Ramsay his permission to deal with Domeric as his bastard had already hinted at more than once. The only thing holding him back was commons sense. With Domeric gone, he would have to make Ramsay an official Bolton. That would mean Roose himself would be the only obstacle standing between Ramsay and the title of ruling Lord of the Dreadfort and he knew all too well how he himself would act if he found himself in a similar position.

Better to try and talk some sense in Domeric once more. The boy had made himself scarce lately. Roose suspected Domeric had already suffered several of Ramsay’s cruel jokes if not survived an outright assassination attempt or two. Well, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. Perhaps Domeric was not a lost cause after all. He would just wait and see how the boys dealt with their rivalry.

In the meantime Ramsay had done all that was ordered of him. Lately he had befriended Theon Greyjoy. Ramsay had staged an accidental meeting at the brothels in Wintertown. Reeling him in had
become easier once Robb Stark was away. Ramsay has earned the Kraken’s trust and fed into his growing hatred for all things Stark. His bastard son had overstepped however and taken Theon with him on a raiding trip. Roose had had to interfere and send Theon back to Winterfell. For now the Ironborn was useful to them there. He could become Ramsay’s plaything soon enough when the Starks were dealt with.

This thought made him feel better. He decided he would accept the invitation and make sure he did not leave Winterfell until he witnessed his heir’s marriage under the famous weirwood tree in the Godwood there, and saw the beautiful red haired Sansa wearing a coat with the Bolton’s sigil on her shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we learn the aftermath of Bran’s situation. Jon somehow arrives on the scene.
In the interlude, Lord Reed gets two unexpected visitors, an unprecedented occurrence for the greenseer.
In the Vale Lord Royce faces an impossible task.
A royal visit -part two

Chapter Summary

We learn the aftermath of Bran’s situation. Jon somehow arrives on the scene. In the interlude, Lord Reed gets two unexpected visitors, an unprecedented occurrence for the greenseer. In the Vale Lord Royce faces an impossible task.

Chapter Notes

Warning: minor character death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya ran to the old Tower. She noticed Nymeria and Summer sitting close to the building, both wolves were looking up. She followed their gaze and saw Bran had scaled the walls. He was really high up and was looking at something through the top window of the tower. Suddenly both direwolves started to growl but kept their eyes trained on Bran. She took a few steps to reach the curved wall of the tower and petted Nymeria to get her to calm down. Arya strained her neck to look up at Bran and noticed someone else was up there. She immediately recognized the blond head of Jaime Lannister, the Queen’s brother that peeked out of the window. Ser Jaime scanned the environment but he failed to notice her, probably because she was standing directly beneath him. She witnessed Ser Jaime putting his hand on Bran’s chest. Bran looked down at her clearly frightened. The enormity of the situation suddenly struck her. Arya screamed for all she was worth.

A few servants, who were working close by dropped what they were doing and ran up to Arya. She pointed toward Bran who was now unsteadily descending. The harness attached with rope to the iron climbing hooks had saved him twice already, once when Ser Jaime had pushed him from the window sill and again when his foot had slipped in his first moments of panic. Jaime Lannister’s head had disappeared. Her little brother, normally so quick and agile was crying and shaking. Even though he was using his new tools, he still was having trouble to come down.

Rodrik Cassel arrived on the scene quickly followed by Catelyn Stark.

“He pushed Bran.” Arya shouted to her mother while pointing to Bran who was almost halfway down by now. “He pushed Bran, and he would have fallen but then he dangled from Jon’s rope and could grab hold of a hook. He would have …,” she had her arms around her mother’s waist. “Please help him. Keep him safe.” She pleaded. Now that help had arrived, Arya started to shake as well. Nymeria left her position at the base of the tower to nuzzle Arya in an effort to comfort her. Arya petted his pelt in thanks and calmed down somewhat. Summer still hadn’t moved a single step, the wolf’s eyes never leaving Bran. The direwolf was barking to the rhythm of Bran’s movements as if to encourage him to keep going.

One of the first servants on the scene had immediately fetched a few bales of straw. “Do not worry
Lady Arya, he is not that high up anymore. And if he falls, the straw will help break his fall.”

They all kept a watchful eye on Bran and saw that the boy had somehow calmed down enough to descend slowly but surely.

Rodrik Cassel assessing Bran’s situation was under control ran inside the tower. He wanted to get to the bottom of this. Who would want to push Bran? However he did not doubt Arya Stark had seen something and quickly scaled the stairs.

He wasn’t prepared for the sight that met him when he reached the chamber at the top of the tower and opened the old door. Jaime Lannister was there in the middle of the room in his shirt and breeches. ‘Didn’t the Kingsguard join the hunt?’ He had his arms around his sister who was weeping in his arms. Her hair was dishevelled, her robe was open. He saw clothes lying on the ground. And now that his brain made the connection he smelled it as well, the distinct odour left after a coupling.

‘But they were brother and sister, twins even?’ He looked as startled as they did when they spotted him. Cassel didn’t say a word but left the room securing the latch on the door from the outside. They wouldn’t go anywhere for now. His mind was in turmoil. This would not end well.

When he came down he noticed a few more servants had gathered. He signalled two Stark houseguards. “Barricade the entrance to the tower and stand guard. Nobody is allowed to leave or enter this building until Lord Stark or I say so. Do not heed anyone else, not even an order from the Kingsguard or from the King himself. You are under orders of the Hand of the King.”

He turned to a third Stark guard. “Gawen, take a fast horse and fetch Lord Stark. He should come at once. Just tell him it is a personal family emergency. Try not to disrupt the hunt. Get Lord Stark to come back alone. Make haste man!”

Cassel surveyed the situation in the yard in front of the tower. Bran’s harness and rope were lying on the ground and the boy was crying in his mother’s arms, his direwolf glued to his side. He quickly went over to the small group of servants, thanked them for their assistance in getting Bran safely down and sent them on their way, reminding them Lord Stark appreciated discretion in all matters concerning his family. He was glad he recognised them all and knew they were loyal subjects of house Stark without exception. This was a catastrophe in the making. Best keep it contained as much as possible until Lord Stark decided how to deal with it. He heard Bran trying to speak to his mother and focused his hearing to find out how much the boy had seen and understood.

“They were doing something strange mama, and then,” he sniffled, “and then the Queen yelled that I saw them and then…” His sentences was interrupted by his sobbing but the need to tell his mother what had happened to him soon won it from his emotions.

“And then she looked ugly and said that I would tell and then Ser Jaime looked really strange at me and then he came over to the window and then he grabbed my shirt and then…” This time the boy paused a moment to catch his breath. “And then he put his hand flat on my chest and then he said something but I can’t remember what and then he pushed me. I was so scared mama. I could hear Arya yell and then I dangled in the air and then I remembered I was wearing the harness. I was so scared mama. I almost couldn’t get down. But then Summer calmed me down. I would have fallen if I had not used my new harness.” Having gotten everything out that he wanted to say he started to sob again.

Catelyn hugged Bran and tried to comfort him but the sobbing only intensified.

“Will Bran be okay mother?” Arya was pulling at her dress. Her usually so brazen girl still looked really upset. “Why did Ser Jaime push Bran mother? Didn’t he realise how high up my brother was. He could have died.”

“Shhh Arya. Father will take care of everything. And Bran is okay, he is safe now. You see,” she pointed at the guards and the locked door, “Ser Jaime Lannister cannot leave the tower. They have
locked him inside. Father will keep you all safe. Now I want us all to go inside and gather in my room. And Arya you are not allowed to tell anyone you saw Ser Jaime. Let father decide what he wants to tell or keep a secret.”

Rodrik Cassel had joined her now and they exchanged a few meaningful gestures and glances. The man gently took Bran from her and together they hurried toward the castle. Catelyn entered the courtyard dragging Arya along. Rodrik Cassel was carrying Bran who had his face buried in the man’s chest. She motioned Lady Brienne to follow her with her children and called for Myrcella and Tommen to join them as well.

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Rodrik Cassel waited for his Lord enter the courtyard and reign in his horse. Clearly Lord Stark had raced all the way here. The horse was lathered in sweat. Lord Stark’s hair was dishevelled and his eyes were wild with worry.

“What happened, Cassel? Gawen wouldn’t say a word. Only that it was a family emergency and I should make haste.”

Cassel looked around and led his Lord to a secluded corner in the courtyard. “Quite a mess, my Lord. Bran scaled the old tower and witnessed Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime coupling when he reached the top window. Jaime Lannister attempted to protect their secret by pushing your son from the tower. Luckily the boy was wearing his climbing harness and didn’t fall all the way down. Arya happened to be looking for him and witnessed the whole thing. Her scream alerted enough witnesses to prevent him from making a second attempt to silence the boy forever. I have taken the liberty to lock the Lannister twins in the old Tower for now. I think nobody knows they are there. The Queen is supposed to be on bedrest in her chambers with her handmaids and everyone here presumes the Kingslayer is with the hunting party. Now I can truthfully say I am very glad I was ordered to stay behind to guard your family, My Lord. I have seen to it that all your children, including Tommen and Myrcella are safe inside the castle. I do not think the smallfolk that came running when Arya screamed caught a glimpse of Ser Jaime and I ordered them in your name not to gossip about what happened to Bran. What shall we do now?”

Ned looked really pale and his eyes sought the ill-fated window of the old tower. “They are locked inside and the guards know what to do?”

“Yes my Lord. Both the door upstairs and the main entrance are barricaded. I have two loyal men standing guard outside.” He looked at his Lord expecting his orders.

“The situation out here seems under control. Now I need to talk to my wife and see my children first. Get someone to fetch Brienne of Tarth and Loras Tyrell, neither of them joined the hunt and will be close by. I want to see to them as soon as I have spoken with my wife. Ask Lord Umber to help us later today. He brought enough men and we may need them to help us counter possible revolts of the Kingsguards and the other royal guards when they return and somehow get wind of what happened here. You can explain the entire situation to the Greatjon but ask him to be discreet for now. Tell him I especially requested his help. Do you happen to know where Lord Tyrion Lannister is? He did not join the hunt either. If you find him, keep him away from the old tower by all means. On second thought, as soon as I have time, I will want to speak to him as well. So bring him to my solar. And Cassel, thanks. You have once more proven you are my right hand man. I will not forget this.”
Lord Stark didn’t wait to see Cassel’s reaction and went in search of his wife. She had just left the
children in the nursery under the care and supervision of their nanny and had ordered two
houseguards to guard the room. She looked relieved to see her husband and followed him to their
bedroom.

“What a mess Catelyn.” He exclaimed as soon as the door was firmly closed. “This was not how we
planned to expose the royal children. It is way too early. Dammit, why was Bran even up there?
Didn’t I tell you of the premonition? He was not allowed to climb as long as the King was staying
with us.” he admonished her, a disapproving look on his face. He paused trying to calm his mind.
This was not the time for casting the blame. He should focus his energy on finding a solution for
now. He took a few deep breaths. When he felt he could be civil once more he continued
interrogating his wife.

“Where are Tommen and Myrcella? What do they know about what happened? We need to keep
them safe from King Robert’s wrath. Best get them to the room with Prince Renly or do you have a
better idea?”

Catelyn wrung her hands. “They do not know what happened. They only know Bran almost fell and
was really upset about it. I am very sure they have neither heard nor seen anything. We must not
scare them. Why not keep them in my room? They will be more comfortable here than in that little
room with Prince Renly. Nobody will suspect they are staying in my private quarters. I can sleep in
your room tonight.”

“That is a possibility. Let me think on that some more. I plan on involving Lady Brienne and Loras
Tyrell. They can help guard the royal children. They are both honourable to a fault and will want to
safeguard these innocent children. If we clearly show them that we are the ones trying to prevent the
royal entourage from punishing three innocent children, we are one step closer to assure their alliance
to our cause. Unless you think they will not be sympathetic to the plight of these three exposed royal
bastards?”

“Lady Brienne will choose to protect them without a doubt. She has more honour in her little toe
than the average knight in his entire body. She will respect you even more for wanting to safeguard
Tommen and Myrcella. And Loras Tyrell, well as long as you help Prince Renly, that boy will
worship the ground you walk on.”

She heard a sound coming from the window and got a bit nervous. “Can I go now and bring the
royal children here before someone belonging to the hunting party gets curious about the reason you
left and sends a scout? I’ll do my best to make them comfortable and keep them away from the
gossip.”

“Okay, you can bring them here. I will make sure to keep the King as calm as possible. The Gods
know how.” He left the room and called for Cassel. “Did you find the lady Brienne and Loras
Tyrell?” Seeing his master at arms nod he continued. “Ask them to come to my solar. Tell them it is
urgent. I also want you to come and get me the moment the King enters the courtyard. No matter
what orders the King might issue, you will come here first. Do you understand? See to it that ample
guards are posted around the old tower but make them blend into the environment somehow. Do you
have enough men to handle all that?”

“Yes my Lord. Consider it done.”

Ned took a moment to think about the possible repercussions to Jon and his cause now that probably
both Ser Jaime and Prince Renly were headed for the Wall where they all knew by now about the
existence of two real life fire breathing dragons. He startled when he heard a knock at the door. He
gave permission to enter and invited Lady Brienne of Tarth and Loras Tyrell to sit down.

Loras didn’t hesitate and used this opportunity to thank him once more for what he had done for Renly. Ned just acknowledged his words with a nod and addressed both of them.

“Where have you both been today? Have you been outside?”

He was astonished to see a blush appear on both their faces.

“We visited Prince Renly just now, my Lord.” Lady Brienne replied honestly. “The guard assured me we had your permission and Loras took advantage of the fact that the King didn’t allow him to join the hunt and was with him the entire time. I joined him as soon as all the children were safely inside. Please let me express my thanks to you as well.”

“You have not heard what exactly happened outside earlier today then?” Ned ignored her thanks, impatient to get to the point and have this issue handled. He still needed to have a long talk with Lord Tyrion before the King returned.

“Lady Brienne told me Bran was upset about some kind of accident but nobody got hurt.” Loras Tyrell was quick to answer and Lady Brienne nodded silently a curious look appearing her eyes now that the strange behaviour of Lady Catelyn earlier took on more importance combined with this strange summons by the Lord of Winterfell.

“Well, something happened and I need your help. I need your word of honour that you will do as I tell you and if somebody else would contradict my orders you will not act upon them until you have taken it up with me first. Not even King Robert can overrule them. Do you understand?

“You will not ask anything that might bring us dishonour?” Lady Brienne would not sacrifice her integrity.

“Quite the opposite actually. I want to ask you to perform a most honourable task. I need your help to protect the lives of innocent children.” He then proceeded to explain exactly what had happened and what he needed them to do.”

“Why us, my Lord?”

“Just in case King Robert does not heed my words and tries to harm Cersei’s children. He will not suspect you of guarding them. He will follow my houseguards and my family members.”

“Why would you believe the King would harm these three children when the culprits are locked up already?”

“He’s done it before when he condoned the brutal murder of the Targaryen royal children.” Ned couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice. He realised he had betrayed himself when he saw their stricken faces.

“My Lord Stark?” Brienne looked perplexed.

“I’m sorry. I am just overcome by the situation. I am the father of five children whom I love dearly. I cannot stand to let a child suffer for things they have no control over. Even if that means I have to disobey my King should he try to harm Queen Cersei’s illegitimate children in a first fit of temper.” He chastised himself for slipping out of his role..

“Your honour is praised throughout the Seven Kingdoms my Lord. Now I understand why. I will serve you without question the next time you have a task for me.” Lady Brienne solemnly pledged.

“You can only do right by one King and if you are not confused where your loyalties lie, then your
path and conscience are clear.’ Ned repeated the mantra in his head once more. If only Jon could stake his claim already. Ned was getting tired of this mummery.

When the pair left to attend to their new duties Cassel led Tyrion Lannister to his Lord’s solar. He had found the dwarf in Winterfell’s library, engrossed in a thick book, a cup filled to the brim with wine and a half empty pitcher next to him.

Ned sighed and steeled himself for a delicate negotiation.
“Sit down Lord Tyrion. We have a lot to discuss.”

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“I’ll have his head. I’ll have her head. Dammit Ned, Varys told me there were rumours but a man doesn’t want to believe something like that. What do I do now? Where do I go from here? I’ll be the laughingstock of the Seven Kingdoms.” Ned had convinced the King to discuss the situation in the privacy of the chambers Robert had been assigned for the duration of his visit. Before he started to explain the situation to him, he had made sure the King was comfortably seated on his bed and he had been plying the man with ale the entire time they were talking. It had been dark outside already when the royal party finally returned from the hunt. The King had been in a bad mood because they hadn’t shot anything significant after his friend had left them never to return to the hunting party again.

“Do not decide anything hasty, your Grace, Robert I mean. Let’s think on this and look at all the options and repercussions. If you want, I will give you my best advice tomorrow when I have had time to look at all the angles.” Ned filled the King’s cup once more and tried to get him to retire.

“I do not want to lay eyes on the bitch ever again. The whore can burn in hell for all I care and take her incestuous spawn with her. What a mess Ned. Why did Lyanna have to die? I would have had such beautiful black haired children with her. The King was sobbing openly now. Ned had tried to get him so drunk he would fall asleep but apparently years of drinking had made the man highly resistant to alcohol. Although the King had drunk an awful lot, he still wasn’t intoxicated enough to render him unconscious.

“Get some rest your Grace. I will have a solution for you in the morning, one that will not make you a laughingstock. Do not forget you are their King. You control their fate. People will still kneel for you and follow your orders. And nothing will prevent you from taking a new wife and having lots of legitimate heirs. Just let me handle it. I am your Hand. It is my duty.”

“What would I do without you Ned? I am glad you are here with me and not old stern Lord Arryn who would have somehow made me believe this was all my doing. You should have come to King’s Landing to rule beside me years ago. All right, I will listen to you for now and get some rest. My head feels like bursting anyway. I will hear your proposals tomorrow but mind you, I will make the final decision. You are too soft-hearted sometimes Ned. A ruler must be ruthless sometimes.”

“I’ll consider that when I formulate possible solutions Robert. Now get some rest.”

The King finally complied and was asleep almost before his head had touched the furs. Ned contemplated the inert body. Where had it all gone wrong? What had happened to the exuberant child that grew up alongside him at the Eyrie? How could that kind boy have become this lazy corpulent drunk that only cared about his own pleasures and did not give a damn about the lives of
his subjects? Robert hadn’t even once enquired after the well-being of Benjen Stark or any of the Lords of the North that fought beside him on more than one occasion. This last thought eased the knot that was prominently present in his stomach since he had accepted the position as Hand of King Robert somewhat.

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The next morning not many people were present in the great hall to break their fast. The Queen had been brought to her chambers late last night and was a virtual prisoner there. They had decided to keep Jaime Lannister locked up in the old tower for now. The King was still sleeping. Lord Stark had barely slept and was already at work. He needed to put everything in place for the contingency plan he had devised with Tyrion Lannister yesterday afternoon.

Lady Brienne was present in the great hall, breaking her fast, in company of Sansa and Arya. Robb Stark, Edric sat at the same table facing them. She had excused the absence of Loras Tyrell stating that Lord Eddard Stark had given him an early assignment. Suddenly there was some commotion at the door and Prince Joffrey burst into the room. The two Stark houseguards that had wanted to keep him from entering shot Robb an apologetic look.

“Where is my father?” he shouted. “I need to speak to the King at once on business that cannot be delayed. Where is he?”

Robb slowly rose from his chair and addressed the Prince. “Prince Joffrey, the King has not left his chambers yet. We suppose he will break his fast in his room. The Kingsguard can inform you when he is willing to allow you an audience.” Robb was surprised that Prince Joffrey was free to roam the castle. Late last night his father had come to his room and had told him what had happened. Robb was sure his father had mentioned that the Lannister twins and the royal children were under guard. Perhaps his father had forgotten to assign guards to the former Crown Prince when the latter returned from the hunt.

Prince Joffrey studied everyone seated at the head table with barely concealed disdain. Then he turned around and left without uttering another word.

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“Lord Stark, you are needed in the King’s chambers at once.” Ned looked up to see a distressed Ser Arys Oakheart standing in the doorway of his solar. He immediately rose from is chair and circled his desk. “Gods, Ser Arys, what has happened. Is the King all right?”

“He is, Lord Hand, but in great need of advice. Please follow me.” Ser Arys looked really pale and Ned was certain something grave had happened. He surmised he would not learn what it was before he heard it from the King himself. He prayed Tomen and Myrcella were still safe in his wife’s room and hurried after the Kingsguard to the King’s quarters.

The first thing his eyes noticed was a body covered by a white cloth on the ground next to the King’s
bed. The single red stain on the otherwise pristine material was growing larger under his stare. He noticed Ser Meryn was not wearing his Kingsguard cloak. King Robert was standing at the other side of the room. Two servants were helping him dress as if it was just a normal day. Ned cleared his throat. “Your Grace?”

“Ah Ned, you’re here. Now you will see what I mean when I say leniency gets you nowhere. He gestured to the corpse on the ground. That bitch’s spawn tried to murder me in my sleep. Show it to him Ser Meryn.” The knight stepped closer and handed Ned a tiny scroll. It was a message from Cersei. It stated that King Robert was planning to declare her a traitor and would disinherit Joffrey, perhaps even have him murdered. She urged her son to kill the King without delay and claim the throne for himself before his father could give the order.

Ned looked at the body. “This is Prince Joffrey? Is he dead?”

“That was the assassin Joffrey Waters.” The King corrected his Hand’s statement. “Ser Meryn saved my life by stabbing him in the back. We shouldn’t have delayed, Ned. We need to punish the culprits now before the Lannisters revolt. They won’t stay ignorant for long now that the twins as well as the Crown Prince will be missing.”

Ned instructed the Kingsguard to remove the body from the room. “For now, just put his body in the antechamber. We will bring him to his own room and summon the Maester when we’ve debated how to handle the situation.” Ser Meryn and Ser Arys needed no further encouragement. They lifted the body, keeping it covered with the white cloak.

The King watched with cold emotionless eyes as his wife’s bastard was carried away. “What miraculous solution have you come up with to rescue my reputation and punish the culprits?” His voice was icy calm.

“Your Grace, let me start by apologising for not putting sufficient guards on Joffrey Waters. I will find out how he was able to leave his chambers.”

The King waved his words away, impatient to hear how his Hand would make this all go away. “Never mind that now, I want to hear your solutions.”

Ned took a deep breath and hoped to get his tone just right, not too pleading, but no too commanding either. It would have to be the King’s decision.

“First I will tell you the story we will spread throughout the realm and next what I propose what we can really do. Will you try to stay patient enough and listen until I have finished explaining?”

The King stayed silent but his entire demeanour warned Ned he best got on with it.
“We will tell the realm that Prince Joffrey has fallen ill and died. It appears he suffered from the same hereditary affliction as his grandfather, Lord Tywin Lannister. Since there is a distinct possibility that the Queen’s other children also carry the disease, you have discussed this tragic discovery with your wife. For the good of the realm, Queen Cersei has agreed to the immediate annulment of your marriage and the removal of her children from the line of the succession. You will take a new Queen who can bare you several healthy children as soon as the High Septon has granted you an annulment.”

Ned had only slightly adapted the story he had devised late last night. He had intended Cersei to be the one inflicted by the imaginary disease. He studied the King and saw him struggle to keep his composure. A myriad of emotions flitted across the man’s face. At first the King seemed intrigued but this soon changed to frustration and now he just looked angry.
“Too lenient Ned. I warned you dammit! Is that all you can come up with?” He frowned.

“This is just the story we will present to the realm, your Grace.” Ned tried to stay calm. “That way we will prevent you from becoming the King who was cuckolded. It is an acceptable reason to annul your marriage without delay. I suggest we imprison Cersei Lannister on Bear Island. That is the most northern island on the west coast of my Kingdom. You surely recall it is ruled by Lady Mormont. There is no way the former Queen can charm her way out of there. The Mormonts are my most loyal subjects. The island is isolated and cold and very far from the Crownlands. She will be afforded only the barest necessities. It will be a harsh punishment for her, your Grace.”

He took a deep breath and addressed the most delicate issue. “I have taken the liberty to discuss the children’s fate with Tyrion Lannister yesterday evening. He is prepared to take them with him to Casterly Rock. They relinquish the Baratheon name of course and sign away all rights to the Iron Throne. In exchange for their lives, Lord Tyron vows he will not allow them to leave the Rock unless a royal decree lifts this banishment. If you agree to this, he will forfeit every loan Tywin Lannister has offered the Crown. He will leave for the Rock as soon as you permit it.”

King Robert’s frown had only grown deeper while Ned talked. “That story you’ve woven lets her fucking twin brother of the hook. Unacceptable Ned!”

“You can punish him for treason your Grace. Pretend you gave him a trial behind closed doors and condemn he to the Wall. A King doesn’t need to provide more details. The situation at the Wall is very dire. Every support is welcomed. I know the Lord Commander personally and will ask him not to allow Jaime Lannister any privileges. I will make sure that he is assigned to the rangers and will be on the front lines of every mission beyond the Wall. On the off chance that he survives the next few years, he will lead a very harsh life, your Grace.”

“I will think on it Ned. I still feel they are getting away too easy.”

“Not necessarily Robert. What would you choose if you were Cersei? A quick death or being kept alive against your will isolated in the North, separated from your children and stripped of all power and wealth. She has been pampered all her life. The same goes for Ser Jaime, except he will have the possibility to get himself killed at the first opportunity beyond the Wall if he can’t cope with his harsh punishment.” Ned did his best to convince his former friend.

“As I said I will think on it. The removal of the incestuous bastards from the line of succession must be ironclad Ned. It can’t contain any loopholes.”

“The moment your marriage is annulled, their claim is null and void. The written statement is only to support our story that they relinquish their right voluntarily. But I will do as you order and present my draft to my maester and have it checked later on by the Grand Maester as well. I will make sure they will never be the ones to threaten your reign Robert.” Ned silently repeated his mantra once more in his head. If anyone had mentioned to him eighteen years ago how duplicitous he would become, he would have challenged the man to a duel for such an enormous insult.

“I will want to read it as well. That doesn’t mean I have decided to accept your solution, mind you. Where are the little bastards now?” Robert’s recalcitrant tone interrupted Ned’s musings.

“Tommen and Myrcella are safe and in the custody of Lord Tyrion. I will not apologise for taking steps to protect them Robert. You knew my feelings regarding a similar situation and made me your Hand regardless. If you were thinking this favour you’ve shown me would change my disposition toward innocent children and are disappointed that this is not the case, I am willing to resign as your Hand this instant. Tommen and Myrcella are not to blame for anything. I will not let any harm come to them if I can help it.” He kept his voice firm so Robert would understand there was no chance he would ever relent. He was glad he had finished the last travel arrangements before he had been
summoned by Robert. At the slightest hint of danger, Lord Tyrion was ready to abscond with his niece and nephew.

“You did not answer my question Ned. Where are they?” The King tried once more.

“Safe for now, your Grace. They will not show their faces and are under guard. I will not tell you more. As soon as Lord Tyrion has signed the necessary papers they will disappear from Winterfell without anyone noticing. With your leave, I will ask Lord Tyrion to take the body of his deceased nephew with him. Let it be his responsibility to dispose of the body in any way he wants.”

“What a bloody mess.” The King sighed and let the subject drop for now. “The situation at the Wall is dire, you say? How is that possible? The reports I read only mention more recruits and plenty of funds for reinforcements.”

“They also mention the Wildlings are settling closer to the Wall and number over a hundred thousand strong. Not to mention the fact that rangers of the Night’s Watch keep disappearing.”

King Robert hardly let him finish his last sentence. He was eager to discuss a new topic. “Who can I marry? Do you have any candidates lined up? I will enjoy making new heirs.” The glee was apparent on his face. Ned hid his disgust and hoped Jon would make his move before the King had the time to remarry.

“Once the realm hears of your annulment you will be the most eligible bachelor in the Seven Kingdoms once again Robert. Offers for betrothals will abound. It would be wise to wait and to see what they will offer you in exchange. You could gain a beautiful young wife and an exorbitant dowry in one fell swoop. I’ll draft you an initial list of candidates soon. But bear in mind I could overlook someone important. I fear I do not know every candidate in the South and would put too many northern ladies on it. So I repeat my advice to give the noble houses of Westeros a chance to dangle their most beautiful maidens and dowries in front of you. It would be unseemly to publicly search for a wife before the annulment is granted anyway.”

“And the Lannisters will not call in their loans?” King Robert was now focusing on the advantages of his current predicament.

“I have Lord Tyrion’s word of honour and also his signature as head of house Lannister.” Ned promised. It looked more and more likely that Lord Tyrion wouldn’t have to steal away like a thief in the night and that the children would remain safe.

Their conversation was interrupted by an urgent knock. Ned walked to the door to check who dared to go against standing orders of the King and disturb them.

“Lord Hand, Winterfell’s Master at Arms informs us of the imminent arrival of Lord Willas of house Tyrell.” Ser Arys informed him

“He comes for his brother, Loras,” Ned stated the obvious to King Robert as soon as he closed the door. “What will you decide my King? I would prefer to keep Loras in the north for now. That gives you leverage against lady Olenna. Surely you know from past experiences you need every advantage to keep her from dictating the way you should run the Seven Kingdoms.”

Ned was at a loss. How could he prevent the King from offering for Lady Margaery? That would most certainly harm Jon’s cause substantially. They had been so sure they were on the brink of bringing the Reach into the fold.

“I hate to refuse him in open court. What a mess Ned, can you deal with it?” Robert Baratheon looked up trusting his new Hand to make this go away as well.

“I will simply prevent him from petitioning you in open court. I’ll see to it Robert. I will promise to
hear him out in private and intimidate him by stating that ambushing you before the court will only force your hand since you are still doubting his innocence.”

“Handle it Ned. And then prepare everything for our journey back to King’s Landing. I won’t stay here a day longer than absolutely necessary.

“I can make arrangements to travel to White Harbour and sail to King’s Landing from there, your Grace. That will shorten the journey substantially and make it more comfortable for you at the same time. You will not be slowed down by a big wheelhouse this time. We’ll use it to convey Cersei north.”

“That’s the first idea I really like Ned. How soon can we leave?

“The day after tomorrow. I need to get a ship commissioned and fitted out to cater to a royal entourage.” He watched King Robert relax.

“That sounds reasonable. You will send me some female company to help me endure my last two nights in the North?”

“I’ll delegate that responsibility to your servants your Grace but will be sure to point them to the right establishment. If I may be excused? I have a lot of arrangements to make.” Ned bowed and left the room in a hurry.

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Lord Willas Tyrell received a warm welcome from the lady of Winterfell. She presented her children to him and Willas couldn’t miss her calculating eyes studying his reaction to her eldest daughter. Sansa was a beauty but still so young. He remembered his grandmother’s wishes and gallantly greeted her by kissing her hand. Her reaction seemed a bit off though. Now that he thought on it, the children all seemed pale and silent. Well his grandmother had warned him it was dreary in the North.

He accepted Robb Stark’s proposal to look for his brother in the training yard and listened to Robb Stark telling him what a great friend his brother had become. Loras was indeed at the training yard. He was sparring with someone whose looks betrayed he was not a northerner. He guessed it was someone from the royal entourage.

Loras greeted him warmly but expressed his surprise at his brother’s arrival. Then he introduced his brother to Edric Dayne the heir of Starfall. It astounded Willas that his brother had not only developed a close friendship to the heir of Winterfell but also to a Dayne. He wondered how his grandmother would receive this news.

After the obligatory greetings were exchanged, he quickly excused himself and his brother to Robb Stark and took Loras to a remote spot where they could talk in private. Loras gave him a brief summary of the events of the day before. His brother had gotten pale and inquired after the fate of the two remaining children of Cersei Lannister.

Loras remembered Willas once having a crush on Myrcella and reassured his brother immediately. “Lord Eddard Stark is looking out for them, Willas. You can trust his honour. If necessary, so he told me personally, he will go against his King’s orders. He cannot condone the suffering of innocent children. However he could do nothing to prevent the King from stripping Tommen and Myrcella of
their titles, their place in the succession and the King will proclaim them illegitimate as soon as the royal marriage is annulled by the High Septon. He trusts me not to spread this story, so please keep this to yourself. They have fabricated some nonsense about a hereditary affliction.”

Willas immediately realised the repercussions. “Grandmother will surely” A small smile broke on Loras’ face when he joined his voice to his brother’s and they finished the sentence together. “want King Robert to marry our sister.”

His mood sobered however when he heard his brother had travelled all this way because grandmother had ordered Willas to fetch him home. Loras had no intention of leaving Renly behind. He grew nervous and informed his brother in a halting manner of Prince Renly’s presence at Winterfell.

Willas expressed his empathy for his brother’s plight but urged him to be cautious all the same. Now he understood why Loras seemed so a happy at Winterfell and the friendships he had developed here. He only wondered how his brother would convince their grandmother to let him stay in the North. Lady Olenna wanted him home sooner rather than later. Willas decided he would hold off on writing home for another day. He needed to gather more information on the ambitions of house Stark before he let her overreact to the news of King Robert’s search for a new queen.

No wonder Sansa Stark and her siblings had hardly reacted to his presence earlier. Their brother had nearly been murdered yesterday.

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The last evening of the royal party’s stay at Winterfell a modest feast had been organised. The Lannisters were noticeably absent. Lord Tyrion had already left with Myrcella and Tommen. They would make the long trip to Casterly Rock over land and were accompanied by the entire Lannister retinue that had formerly been a part or the royal entourage. Eddard Stark had promised Robert to replace these men with Stark guards. He didn’t betray to King Robert how he had taken every precaution to assure Tyrion was granted safe passage through the Neck and the Riverlands by giving him a small northern escort to ease their way through the northern villages. He also didn’t tell him of all the other things he had discussed with Lord Tyrion to make him compliant enough to sign anything he had put before him.

The Queen’s wheelhouse had left Winterfell in the middle of the night. Lord Umber had offered to escort Cersei Lannister to Bear Island. The Greatjon had split up his men. The other half would accompany Jaime Lannister and Renly Baratheon to the Wall. Earlier today Eddard Stark had sent a raven to the Lord Commander with detailed instructions. In the end the King had decided to follow his Hand’s advice without any further protestations. The man was already considering every fair maiden he knew of and was glad enough to leave the sordid details to his Hand.

Maester Luwin entered the great hall and whispered something in Lord’s ear. Ned excused himself to the King stating a problem had arisen and needed his immediate attention. He would probably not return until much later but he needed to leave now in order to ensure nothing disturbed their departure on the morrow. He softened the blow substantially by reminding Robert of the two female companions that were awaiting him in his room as soon as his Grace was ready to retire.

“What could possibly be so urgent that you asked me to leave King Robert for the rest of the
evening? Not another royal scandal I hope?” Lord Stark asked as soon as they entered the corridor. He eyed his Maester with exasperation.

“My Lord, a raven landed on my shoulder.” A significant look accompanied his words and a tiny scroll was handed to Eddard Stark.”

Ned startled. “Jon is here? Why would he take such a risk knowing Robert is at Winterfell? Where? How? The message states ‘take a horse and follow the raven’, my Lord. You should leave now and go alone. I am sure it is not a trap. Who else but Jon could deliver a message in such a peculiar fashion?”

“I’ll leave immediately.” Ned accepted the cloak Maester Luwin handed him.

“I took the liberty of sending someone to fetch your horse for you. I’ll inform your lady wife and Robb as well as soon as you are gone my Lord.” The man bowed and went back to the great hall.

Ned followed the raven and was glad that the bird followed a familiar path that circled around the exterior walls of the Godswood. It was getting rather dark and the clouds prevented the moon and the stars from providing extra light.

Soon enough he saw Jon sitting against a tree. He scanned the environment but saw nobody else. Jon got up when he dismounted and he was surprised to see his nephew’s imposing posture. He remembered Robb mentioning the same to him. Well it fit with the impression his last letters had given him of the youth’s newly developed authority. His nephew was growing into a strong leader and started to look the part as well. He didn’t hesitate and hugged him. Ned was relieved to feel the young man returned his hug with alacrity. Apparently things hadn’t changed that much.

“Good to see you Jon. Oh Gods, look at you. I am so proud of you. But why did you come here? Did anyone see you?”

“Do you know how fast I can get here on the back of my dragon?” Jon replied a smile on his face. “It was a cloudy night, uncle. We flew above the clouds the entire way and only ventured below them to land here behind the Godswood. Nobody noticed a thing.”

“I am glad to hear it. I was sorry to hear about Maester Aemon.”

Jon swallowed but didn’t offer any comment.

“Why did you come however?” Ned repeated his earlier question.

“I was at the Wall when your raven arrived, describing Bran’s attempted murder. The early discovery of the royal bastards can have severe repercussions. A lot has happened after Robb left me at Sea Dragon Point at our end as well and we’ve had to make some difficult decisions. Since I was such an easy distance from Winterfell, I concluded it would be easier if we could talk face to face. What’s more, Lord Reed urged me speak to you. He had another premonition. If we can bounce ideas of each other, we will accomplish more than sennights of exchanging messages ever could. Davos and I even fabricated a little list in order not to forget anything. Jon took out a tiny scroll.

“Don’t you have a Hand to discuss all of that with?” Ned couldn’t prevent the remark from slipping out.

Jon studied his uncle and exhaled deeply before responding. “Davos is always at my side, uncle. You and I are in contact as much as we can but it often takes too long for your advice to reach me to still be timely or relevant when it arrives. I hope I do not need to repeat how much I appreciate all
you have done for me and how I look up to you as an example of a good leader.” Jon swallowed and continued, “I have taken the trouble to fly here to talk things over with you. Doesn’t that prove anything?” He scrutinized his uncle who although clearly moved by his nephew’s words stayed silent all the same.

Jon made another effort to sway him. “Didn’t you read my letter? I wrote that if at any given time you decide you want to become my Hand and live by my side in King’s Landing, I will name you my Hand as well and will become known as the King who ruled with the assistance of two of the best Hands in the entire history of Westeros.”

“I am sorry.” Lord Stark didn’t stall his answer any longer. “You were absolutely right in appointing Davos Seaworth and I am honoured you came all the way here to seek my advice.”

Clearly relieved, Jon asked his uncle to give a detailed account of the aftermath of Bran’s climb. He paled when he heard of the violent death of the former Crown Prince. He didn’t have time however to examine how he felt about that now. They needed to discuss the repercussions the presence of Jaime Lannister and Renly Baratheon at the wall would have on their plans. When they had exhausted that subject Jon remarked with wry humour. “It will become crowded at the Wall. Did you know Prince Oberyn is on his way there as well?”

His face turned serious once more when he continued. “I was thinking of asking Prince Oberyn to return to Dorne. That or have him come up with another way to bring his brother into the fold. That last stunt of Prince Doran Martell, sending Prince Quentin Martell to Pentos doesn’t sit well with me. Besides, it is time uncle. We are making our move on Dragonstone.” He then told his uncle most of what had happened since Robb had left them. Uncle Benjen sends his greetings but you should have received a raven from him already.

Jon also elaborated on his temporary solution for the Free Folk without revealing anything about his turbulent stay at Castle Black. “I do not have the authority and we gather it is too early to convince the Lords of the North to offer the Free Folk sanctuary south of the Wall until the White Walker threat has been dealt with. I have ordered a large part of the fleets stationed at Bear Island and Skagos to sail to the wall. They can harbour the woman, children and everyone too weak to fight for a while.” He looked at his uncle. “I took these decision mere moments after seeing their predicament. I decided I could not wait to hear your opinion on the matter. I figured time was of the essence. The ships are already on their way. I contacted Lord Manderly directly. I hope you will understand.”

“I think it is an excellent solution.” Ned reassured his nephew. “I pray that one day we can get the Free Folk and the Northerners to live together in peace but you are right. It is much too soon and you will need the Lords of the North on your side. Forcing them to accept Wildlings on their territory would have alienated them. I do not think I would have come up with a solution as fast as you have.” He saw Jon’s face lose its apprehensive expression at the unexpected compliment.

“What can you tell me about Lord Reed’s premonition?” Ned had been waiting for that to come up the entire time.

“Funny you should mention the Vale.” But his serious slightly guilty expression belied the lightness of his words. Ned proceeded to tell him of his wife’s correspondence with Littlefinger and the news he had inadvertently learned. “Littlefinger intends to become Lord of the Vale and even plans to make Lord Robin the next heir to the iron throne by marrying him to Shireen Baratheon. That way he will become Lord Regent.” He then informed Jon of his letters to Lord Royce and the man’s efforts to try and bring Robin Arryn under his protection.

Jon looked thoughtful. He had not missed the unspoken question of his uncle. He astonished him
however with his part of the news. “Littlefinger has almost instigated a war with Dorne by providing false information to the small council. King Robert has insulted Prince Doran and only Prince Oberyn’s timely intervention has defused the situation. Littlefinger believed rumours Varys and Oberyn successfully sabotaged as they set Baelish up for the fall.”

“What false rumours?” This was news to Ned.

“That the dragon that presumably attacked pirates over the Narrow Sea belongs to Dorne and the attack was a test run before they would target King’s Landing to revenge the death of Elia Martell and her children. But that is not all. Lord Reed knows that it was Lysa Arryn that killed her husband with poison handed to her by Littlefinger. He is not sure but he suspects that Lord Robin Arryn is actually Baelish’s bastard.”

“Poison? Do you know which one?” Ned asked

“Tears of Lys.”

“Do you have any evidence to support this accusation?”

“Prince Oberyn has described the exact symptoms and they match Lord Arryn’s ailments. Varys has gotten Maester Pycelle to confess a bottle went missing after a visit of Petyr Baelish but he hadn’t connected the dots before. It is time he retired.” Jon sighed. If the citadel insists a Maester’s position is for life, they should at least instate a new rule that after a certain age, they send a young Maester to assist him at first so he can slowly take over when his older colleagues is no longer capable. I am sorry. I have gotten off track. I think we have sufficient proof to condemn Littlefinger. Add that to the other indictments you already collected.”

“It will be my first order of business when I arrive at King’s Landing. I will also be proclaiming Lord Royce as regent of the Vale until the time Lord Robin comes of age or you decide otherwise when you are King. I hope that meets with your approval.”

“It is the right thing to do. What about the Freys in the Riverlands? Do you think that situation will resolve itself by eliminating Littlefinger?”

“I’m not sure. Who knows whether he is the only mastermind of this situation? I will be grilling the small council at the first opportunity. For now I have sent a small contingency of men to the Riverlands. I hope that will send the message to the Freys that the Tullys are not without support.”

“I hope Robb has told you about the offer I got from Yara Greyjoy.” Jon proceeded to tell his uncle the details about their tentative alliance and the fact that Euron Greyjoy would be attacking somewhere south. “I have warned the Reach and Oldtown.” He concluded.

“Talking about the Reach,” Ned said. “I fear lady Olenna will be no longer be persuaded to join your cause. She will surely try to marry her granddaughter to King Robert.”

Jon was silent for a while. Ned could almost see the wheels in his head turning. “What if we gambled a bit? You told me Willas Tyrell is also at Winterfell. You have the future of her house right there. I suggest we tell him about the three surviving Kingsguards of house Targaryen who are fostering a male heir with dragons. We tell him what you did for Renly Baratheon, Loras Tyrell and the former royal children. We conclude by proposing a marriage alliance between your houses as further enticement and my assurance they can stay on as ruling house of the Reach.” Ned saw him look in the distance before continuing. “What if we talked to Loras as well?”

“While you’re at it, why not invite lady Brienne to your party?” Ned said taken aback by the risky
“Actually, that is not a bad idea.” Jon replied, “Although not simultaneously. I think I can get her on board easily if we have the support of both Tyrell brothers. In the event that Willas and Loras take King Robert’s side, well, they are at Winterfell and completely in your power. Just imagine uncle, if this succeeds, I can almost walk up the stairs of the Red Keep and seat myself on the iron throne without encountering any opposition.”

“You forget King Robert and his court, Stannis Baratheon and all the bannermen of the Stormlands, The Westerlands with the Lannisters, The Ironborn. And the Reach can still turn around and betray our secrets, or plan to blackmail this male Targaryen into marrying her granddaughter.”

“I said almost uncle. The Lannisters will pose no problem. One good talk with Tyrion Lannister and he will stay neutral perhaps he will even help us. Stannis will stand alone. I do not see him align himself with the Ironborn. Did you know that Lord Reed has found a possible weakness? Allegedly, Lord Stannis has started to worship the Lord of Light. Lord Reed is sending someone his way to see if we can use this knowledge to our advantage. He will keep us informed when they have made significant progress. I just think he enjoys being this mysterious greenseer. But I can’t fault him for that. He has helped our cause tremendously. As far as the Lady Olenna is concerned, she does not need to know the male heir of house Targaryen is still single.”

Jon stopped his discourse to debate the issue of the Tyrells once more. “On second thought, I do not like to gamble with the Tyrells. They are loyal only to themselves. But could we not compromise. We could slowly try to get Willas on board. Drop little hints and see how he reacts before we proceed any further.”

Ned looked perplexed but Jon just continued. “The timing is tricky however. The royal party leaves Winterfell on the morrow.”

Jon finally noticed his uncle’s expression. “What?”

“Do you always change your mind that quickly on important decisions like this? I do not know what to say.” His uncle hesitated to say more.

“Uncle, I haven’t made up my mind yet on how to deal with the Tyrells. This is the way I usually work through my issues. I think aloud with my advisers listening and commenting. Sam calls it brainstorming. We bounce ideas of each other and only reach a final conclusion after we have looked at all angles. Davos often takes on the role of spoilsport and opposes or challenges every detail of my plans. That way we find the weak spots and adjust our strategy or come up with entirely new plans.”

“So help an old relative out then who is not familiar with your strange ways of strategizing. Did we already reach a conclusion or are we still racking our brains? How in the Gods’ names do Davos and Ser Gerold keep up with you?” Ned complained but his eyes twinkled.

“Would you agree to let Robb bait Willas a bit? See how he reacts to the rumours of dragons and the possibility of Targaryens returning? You cannot do it yourself since you are leaving on the morrow. It also gives us the possibility to deny everything should Willas react badly at the first few hints. You as Warden of the North and Hand of the King could still laugh it all away mentioning your son has a vivid imagination and does not speak for house Stark yet.”

“I’ll speak to Robb and see how he feels about it.” Ned was glad his nephew had decided on a more subtle approach and had not insisted on going through with his initial risky idea.

“You know,” Jon continued unaware he was stepping into a hornet’s nest, “there is another solution. If you get Lady Olenna to sign off on a betrothal between Robb and lady Margaery, she would no
longer have the option to catch the King as a bridegroom.”

“I have already opened up negotiations with Lord Manderly. His granddaughter Wylla and Robb are friends and Lord Manderly has supported your case almost from the beginning.” Lord Stark had stiffened slightly and watched Jon’s reaction closely.

“Strange,” Jon replied deep in thought. “Robb has not mentioned that to me. How does he feel about it?”

“He stalls,” Ned couldn’t keep the truth from his nephew. Robb had probably already sent a message to Jon’s entourage.

Now it was Jon’s turn to study his uncle. “I would understand your desire to arrange this betrothal if Robb really liked the girl. House Manderly is a rich and loyal House. Politically speaking though, it is not the best marriage. So if Robb stalls because he is not partial to the girl, why not be more ambitious and try for the beautiful unwed daughter of the lord Paramount of the Reach.”

“He only stated we needed your approval and that you might have other prospects in mind. He named several, Lady Margaery being one of them. Have you discussed this with him?”

“We spoke of the fact that you swore allegiance to me and that I might have some influence on the decision if ever he was forced to marry an ugly fat woman of house Frey. Nothing more specific was discussed. I am not sure what to say to you here, uncle.” Jon seemed hesitant.

“Let’s table it for now then. I’ll stall Lord Manderly.” Ned relented. “But think on it. It is a good proposal.”

“Do you mind if I speak to Robb about this? I would like to hear his thoughts on both proposals. He knows he will have to marry for political reasons, but since he will be the one that will be living with the girl for the rest of his life, I would like to hear his opinion on the subject before you and I make a decision. It will have to be by letter though. I need to concentrate on the threat at the Wall first.”

“I can get Robb here in no time Jon. I would really like to resolve this matter with Lord Manderly.” Ned tried once more.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind seeing Robb. Jon face lit up at the thought of seeing his cousin but his smile lasted only an instant. He wouldn’t do to give his uncle false hope. “Bear in mind that I can’t promise you that I can make such an important decision tonight, uncle. Besides, Robb has not reached his eighteenth nameday yet. You do not have to marry him off right away. I would prefer to focus on the situation at the Wall first. I just brought up his possible betrothal to help keep Lady Olenna’s ambitions away from King Robert.”

“I understand Jon. I only wished things could be different. I hate this mummery. I will be glad when everything is out in the open and I can be honest and straightforward again. I feel guilty every time King Robert praises me for being such a good friend. I had hoped that now that you are using the dragons and rumours are starting, it wouldn’t be long before you made your move and I can stop lying to everyone. You can’t expect me to be happy about your decision of changing your focus to situation at the Wall when we are so close to starting your bid for the throne.”

Jon realised his uncle was tired and knew by personal experience that problems always seemed more difficult when you were exhausted. “I am sorry uncle. I know you have by far the most difficult role and that it asks a lot of your mental strength. Once everything is resolved I will stress to everyone in Westeros how nobly you saved the life of the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Your honour will be loudly praised. Do not forget, history books are written by the victors. We will not allow King
Robert or anyone else for that matter to smear your good name. I have even come up with a reward for you and the North.” Jon proceeded to tell his uncle how he saw the North’s role in this new world he would be creating.

Ned was speechless. He just stared at the sky and contemplated the unexpected path this one decision he had made seventeen year ago had taken him on and tried to imagine what was still to come. When he felt Jon shift beside him he came back to the present and told Jon he was going to fetch Robb and promised him he would be back here in not time.

Jon stalled him however. “I still have a few things I would like to go over with you. But first can you assure me you will heed Lord Reed’s other warning and not take your children to King’s Landing?” Jon asked his uncle.

Ned assured him he was leaving them all behind and added that his wife had given him a lot of grief over it these last few days. Then he encouraged Jon to get on with his next topic.

“I can’t help but think we should exploit the fact that I am helping the North out at the Wall to gain the recognition of the Lords of the North. The people at the Stony Shore have seen me in action and I am fairly certain they will support my claim if I ask for their help with your backing. Is there a possibility you could send representatives of the more important Northern Houses to the Wall to bear witness to what is really happening there? Only if they believe there really is a White Walker threat, will they be able to fully appreciate the lengths we all went through to protect the people of the North and the rest of the realm.”

“I’ll talk to them, or let Robb talk to them if I do not find the time before we depart on the morrow.” Ned sighed. “Is that it?”

“I had thought to tell you in detail how we are planning to invade Dragonstone but I can also send you the report.”

“Just give me a quick summary, mention only the things that weren’t mentioned in your last scroll.” Jon spoke quickly and Ned was glad this was a well thought out plan and would be carried out with minor upheaval. Finally Ned got up to fetch his son. It was growing rather late. He knew his wife would be growing anxious.

Lord Stark returned swiftly with Robb and gave them some privacy. He saw both cousins embrace each other. It was evident they enjoyed a close bond. Jon and Robb sat down with their backs turned to Ned. Suddenly Greywind stormed onto the scene and toppled Jon. The young man just laughed and hugged the wolf talking softly to him. When Greywind had calmed down and settled himself at Robb’s feet, the boys resumed their talk. Ned waited patiently until they stood up and walked over to him. He met them halfway. It was Jon who broke the silence.

“No betrothal to house Manderly yet uncle. Let’s first wait and see what can be done to bring the Reach into the fold. There are other possibilities. Perhaps Willas will offer for Sansa? We need to know more before you commit your heir. He is our biggest trump card.”

“No Jon,” his uncle replied the disappointment evident in his tone of voice. “You are. You do realise you risk becoming Lady Olenna’s target.”

“No Jon,” his uncle replied the disappointment evident in his tone of voice. “You are. You do realise you risk becoming Lady Olenna’s target.”

“Then I will stall her as well.” Jon kept his voice firm. “Things will move fast. Just stall Manderly a few moons”. He looked towards the clouded sky. “I hate to part from you with this awkward feeling lingering between us, uncle.” Jon felt his uncle’s disappointment keenly.”

Ned made an effort and smiled. Jon was right. They should part on a better note. A pack had only
one leader and needed to rally behind him if they were to succeed. He knew just the thing to lift everyone’s spirit. “Anyone here wants to hear about the origin of our inexhaustible war fund?”

“Are you finally ready to tell us uncle?” Jon replied fully conscious of the effort Lord Stark was making. He returned his smile and lightly touched his uncle’s arm to convey a silent thank you.

Ned’s smile grew more mysterious when he replied. “Only if you boys can keep a secret.” A bit later he enjoyed their looks of utter unbelief.

When his uncle started to take his leave Jon stalled him once more. Uncle, Robb just relayed something to me that Bran told him in confidence yesterday. It seems his direwolf helped him descend the wall of the old tower safely. Bran described to his elder brother how Summer talked to him in his mind. He claimed his wolf calmed him down and encouraged him step by step. You should talk to him since I can’t do it myself. There have been more instances where he and his wolf connected. Let Robb tell you the particulars. Perhaps you should consider fostering him out to Lord Reed for a few years. With the right tutoring Bran could become a powerful warg.”

Ned promised to take that in consideration. It was high time Ned and Robb returned to their guest. Jon hugged Robb first and then turned to his uncle who initiated their embrace. “Thank you uncle, for everything.” Ned felt his nephew’s words came from the bottom of his heart. He tightened the hug a bit accentuating their restored bond.

“Stay safe,” Ned said, reluctantly ending the hug.

“You as well uncle.” Jon took a few steps back, closed his eyes and called for Rhaegal. “Best keep your distance,’ he warned them. “And Robb keep Greywind in check.”

Ned would never forget the awe inspiring sight of Jon mounting Rhaegal and how gracefully both dragons ascended again to disappear from his sight only moments later when they reached the clouds. He often summoned this memory when he felt guilty during the journey south in the company of King Robert. It would only be when he reached King’s Landing and heard the rumours floating around, that he realised that Jon had not flown off in the direction of the Wall but had taken his dragons south.

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Loras had said a tearful goodbye to Lord Renly. It could be several years before Renly would be allowed to leave the wall. Robb urged him to keep faith, reminding him that his father was working on a solution. As Hand of the King Lord Eddard Stark had the power to change things for the better in the Seven Kingdoms. The Starks had been nothing but amazing these past few days. Earlier when Robb had informed him that Lord Tyrion Lannister was about to leave, they had both petitioned Robb’s father to allow Prince Renly to say goodbye to the children he had loved as niece and nephew all these years. Lord Stark had immediately arranged for Tommen and Myrcella to pay a short visit to Renly’s room. Loras had seen to it that Willas happened to be calling on Prince Renly at the exact same time. His brother had not wasted the opportunity and had pressed a small scroll in Myrcella’s hand when he wished her a safe journey. The pale teary eyed girl’s cheeks had flushed with colour. She had quietly accepted the scroll and concealed it in her sleeves.
Willas Tyrell had decided to stay on at Winterfell for a while since Loras refused to leave the North. Two sennights later, Willas cornered his brother in his room where Loras was changing his outfit before supper.

“I know you consider Robb Stark a friend but I am growing more suspicious of house Stark’s hidden motives.” When his brother darted him an astonished glance he tried to explain the reasons for his mistrust.

“It started the very day King Robert left. Do you recall how after supper he invited us to stay a little while longer and ordered more wine? The conversation started innocently enough but then he alluded to the lucrative trade deals between our regions the North had instigated. Over the next few days he dropped more hints. He mentioned the gardening techniques the North had shared with us that had increased productivity in the Reach, the recent warning of a possible Ironborn attack and some less important ones.”

Loras had finished fastening the buttons of his tunic and lifted his head, his eyes silently mocking his brother.

“Try and think for once, Loras. I have replayed every conversation in my head and have not found a single encounter without the heir of Winterfell trying to point out how much the Reach needs the North.”

Loras smile reached his eyes now. “Robb Stark is a good friend and house Stark is trustworthy, Willas. I am well aware that Robb Stark has a hidden agenda although he is not very good at hiding it from me.”

“If that is your way of reassuring me,” Frustration radiated from the elder Tyrell. He saw his brother’s smile grow even wider.

“Relax Willas. When you are not around, Robb can’t stop asking questions about Margaery. He wants me to describe her looks, her personality and asks why she is not betrothed yet. It is rather obvious that Robb Stark has set his sights on our sister.” When he noticed his brother was not convinced he continued. “Willas, the Starks have helped me and Renly any way they could. Myrcella and Tommen owe their present comfort to Lord Stark, if not their lives. There is more at play here than you know.” Loras avoided eye contact with his brother now. He had a faraway look that made Willas even more worried.

Willas knitted his brows. “Loras, whatever do you mean?”

“I am sorry brother. I vowed on my honour as a Tyrell not to reveal anything I discovered during my stay at Winterfell or during the trip across the Riverlands.”

Willas scrutinized his brother who just glared back not giving an inch. “Loras what have you done now? What have you vowed exactly to house Stark?”

“Not nearly as much as I swore to Edric Dayne after he found out where Renly was being kept and obtained Lord Stark’s permission for me to visit him as much as I wanted. I believe I literally promised him he could ask any service of me, anytime.”
“You do realise they can ask you to murder the King and you would be honour bound to do it?”

“Edric is my friend, Robb is my friend and Lord Stark literally told me we are all on the same side. I figure I can reveal you that much at least. Besides, my vow to Lord Stark released me from my vow to Edric Dayne sort of.” Loras crossed his arms and pursed his lips. Willas realised he would not get more out of his little brother for now.

“Just do not tell grandmother any of this Loras. She will not rest until you have told her every tiny discovery you have made since leaving King’s Landing. I am not happy about any of this but I will not force you to break a vow. That doesn’t mean I will not try to find out what is going on by keeping my eyes and ears open.”

“I wish you luck brother. But do remember the Starks are not the enemy. If there is one thing I am sure of after all I have witnessed, that is it. Come on, I am hungry. Let us find the heir of Winterfell and tell him some more about the paragon that is our sister.” Loras put his arm around his brother and led him out of the room.

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After breaking their fast the next morning, Robb invited them to join him in the Godswood. Willas had not been allowed in there before. He was eager to follow his brother’s example and removed his boots so he could bathe his feet in the warm water of the famous hot springs. He should have known it was all just a ruse of Robb Stark to get them to relax and lower their guards. They had hardly finished some observations about the enchanting weirwood tree when Robb surprised them by changing the topic to the rumours concerning the dragons that were spotted in Westeros.

“Do you believe there is any truth to them?” Robb asked casually.

Willas saw through his innocent remark immediately. Loras’ so called friend was up to something. Only he hadn’t the faintest idea what is was. Willas exchanged a look with Loras, while he contemplated whether it was safe to reveal part of his grandmother’s suspicions.

“We do not know what to think. Some say the dragon belongs to the Targaryen Princess across the Narrow Sea.” He hedged.

“Wouldn’t it be something if that were true? I heard Princess Daenerys is supposed to be a beauty. Wasn’t your house loyal to the Targaryens?” Robb seemed glad Willas had mentioned the Targaryen Princess.

“Almost everyone in the Seven Kingdoms was loyal to house Targaryen at one time, house Stark as well.” Willas kept his face neutral but his stiff posture revealed he was on his guard.

“True, but doesn’t your house owe their current position to house Targaryen? Would you raise your banners for them if they asked for your support?”

Only the rustling of the leaves of the trees and the faint rippling of the hot water could be heard as Willas and Loras stayed silent.

“What if I told you house Stark might consider an alliance with house Targaryen?” Robb tried once more to get a reaction out of both Tyrells.
“What? That’s impossible. Your father is Hand to King Robert. The entire realm knows what he calls the Targaryen offspring.” Willas was even more wary of Robb Stark now. The boy had an agenda and it was not simply ingratiating himself with house Tyrell. It almost seemed as if he was trying to get them to expose themselves as traitors to the Crown so his father could call for their heads.

“You have my word as a Stark that whatever we talk about here in the Godswood stays between us and I only asked you hypothetically.” Robb reassured the elder Tyrell. “Perhaps I am just curious because I heard rumours that house Tyrell had opened up negotiations with the Targaryen Princess in Essos? Hypothetically speaking, we could one day find ourselves on the same side.”

Loras looked at Robb in a peculiar way. “Is this related to what I have seen in the Riverlands?” he ventured.

“It might be, but remember your oath. You will only be allowed to tell your brother if he swears the same oath in my presence.”

Willas looked at his brother with dismay. The boy had done nothing but swear vows lately. He turned his attention to Robb. Now it was his turn to throw Stark off balance. “If this is your way of courting our sister, you sure go about it in a strange fashion.”

Robb didn’t flinch but almost laughed away this last comment. “As if I am able to decide that for myself. No, I will have to marry for political reasons and my bride will be chosen for me. I am just intrigued by all the rumours of dragons lately. Did you know two were spotted here in the north at the Stony Shore?”

Willas Tyrell did not react and a subtle gesture to his brother resulted in Loras staying silent as well.

Robb decided to give up for today. “Will we ask Lady Brienne to join us for a sparring session? I have been inactive for too long. I want to release some energy, before Maester Luwin summons me for some boring task I need to perform now that I am acting Lord of Winterfell.

Loras was quick to oblige him, and started to put his boots back on. Willas politely declined by mentioning his leg would not allow him to join their session. He retired to the library where he could strategize in peace. He had to find a way to get Loras to reveal under what circumstances he had given these vows and to repeat them to him word for word. Perhaps he should write a long letter to his grandmother after all. If anyone would be able to make sense of all this, it would be her.

On their way to the courtyard Loras and Robb startled Edric who was sitting on a bench next to Sansa. Robb had noticed them from afar. He had observed how Edric was listening intently to his sister the entire time it took them to approach. The couple did not notice their arrival until the others were already upon them. Sansa blushed while Edric jumped from the bench and joined his friends. Upon hearing their plans Sansa volunteered to go inside and fetch Lady Brienne. They were just about to tease Edric when their friend forestalled them by blaming his friends for leaving him alone. Edric complained he had looked all over for them. Robb diverted his attention by challenging Edric and Loras to a small competition. He had been winning more lately and boasted he could win against them both today. They spent an enjoyable morning together.
Interlude 16: Useful allies

Part one: Greywater Watch

For the first time in his life, Lord Reed doubted the Old Gods were the only Gods that mattered. Unexpected visitors had challenged his beliefs. His scouts had informed him that two men had already ventured half way through the swamps on their own. They described them as a Westerosi knight and a priest from Essos. Lord Reed had ordered his scouts to guide the two men the rest of the way to Greywater Watch and bring them to him.

Howland Reed personally greeted his unexpected guests at the entrance of his keep. The men introduced themselves as Lord Beric of house Dondarrion, Lord of Blackhaven in the Stormlands and Thoros of Myr a red priest who lived in Westeros but had kept to his own faith and still worshipped the Lord of Light. Lord Reed had heard of both men. He remembered the priest was an experienced fighter. Ned Stark had told him of the man’s brave but reckless exploits during the Greyjoy Rebellion. He offered his visitors salt and bread while they were still standing in front of the hall.

A bit later the three of them were safely ensconced behind closed doors in Lord Reed’s solar. The two travellers were staring as if transfixed into the fireplace around which they were all seated in cosy chairs strategically placed in a half circle. Lord Reed ignored their behaviour and came straight to the point.

“My Lords, can you oblige a surprised host and inform him of the purpose of your visit to my remote domain?” he started the conversation.

“The Lord of Light has sent us here to help your cause. “ Thoros of Myr proclaimed reluctantly shifting his eyes from the fire to his host. “Your Prince needs our help.”

“My Prince?” Lord Reed exclaimed not able to hide his shock. It was not often someone could catch him entirely off guard. It usually happened the other way around.

“The Prince Who Was Promised, he who will lead the fight against the Darkness. The Lord of Light has shown him to us in the fires. My God guided us through your swamps and kept us safe. This alone should convince you we are speaking the truth.” Thoros of Myr told all of this in a flat tone of voice which was in stark contrast to the high pitched tone Lord Reed had just used during his short outburst. The priest didn’t need to raise his voice to get his meaning across. Absolute belief in the message of his God radiated from his entire being.

“Do you know where to find this Prince?” Lord Reed was on high alert now. His Gods had not warned him of this strange visit. Did these strangers know of the existence of the Targaryen Prince? Were they even talking about Jon or was this Prince they mentioned someone entirely different? Somehow he didn’t believe that.

“He is where the Darkness grows and the snow never melts. Only he is worthy to take on the threat that lurks there. Rest assured. We are here to serve your Prince, not to harm him.” Thoros tried to reassure his host.

“He speaks the truth. Beric Dondarrion spoke up for the first time. “I’ve seen it in the flames as well. We came to warn you about the false Prince.”

“Beric, now you are scaring the poor man.” Thoros admonished his traveling companion. “We came
to warn you that a red Priestess has singled out another as the Prince Who Was Promised. The deluded man believes her every word. He has already made a human sacrifice on her orders to please the Lord of Light. Her magic makes him stronger and he will become a threat to the cause of your Prince. If the red Priestess succeeds, the real Prince Who Was Promised may never fulfil his destiny.”

“So that is how you do not scare the man, is it?” Beric admonished the red Priest.

“I am sorry,” Lord Reed interrupted the two bickering men, “why exactly are you telling me all this?

“R’hllor, our Lord of Light acknowledges that you are guiding the real Prince. But the red Priestess’ magic shields the intentions of the false Prince from the Old Gods.” Thoros of Myr knew the existence of the Lord of Light would be a difficult thing to accept, especially to this man who had such a close relationship with his own Gods. And they needed Lord Reed not only to believe in His existence, they had to convince him their Fire God and the Old Gods were on the same side for once.

And will you reveal the identity of this false Prince my Gods are unable to warn me about or do you enjoy speaking in riddles?” Howland Reed needed more information before he was willing to disclose anything himself.

Thoros of Myr on the other hand knew with absolute certainty that their purpose was to help the Prince who would save them all and was confident that they could safely reveal their sacred mission to this man. He signalled his companion that he should go ahead.

Lord Dondarrion spoke up “The Red Priestess, Melisandre is it at Storm’s end and has Stannis Baratheon under her spell. The Lord of Light guided us here because you will need our assistance to deal with this situation. Will you now repay our trust and reveal the identity of the real Prince Who Was Promised to us?” Thoros leaned forward in his chair and stared firmly in the greenseers’ eyes to make his words more convincing.

“How do I know you are not looking for my so-called Prince to offer him up to your Lord of Light? Red priests burn their sacrifices, don’t they? If you presume I have protected him for this long, why would I risk him now?”

“You can trust us. I swear it upon my honour. It was the Lord of Light who guided us through your swamps because he realises your Prince, born of ice and fire is the only one who can bring the Dawn. Our God and your Gods have the same purpose. They are working together to save the realms of men from the danger that lurks behind the Wall.” Lord Dondarrion looked beseechingly at Howland Reed.

Lord Reed sighed. There was no doubt left in his mind. They were talking about the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. However he still wanted to try and contact his Gods before he went against the directives the conspiracy had held onto for more than seventeen years.

“If that is the case, let us drop this subject for now. I will consult the Old Gods tonight. You are of course very welcome to stay the night. You are the first visitors we have received from that part of the realm.” Lord Reed had tabled the delicate topic for now.

Not waiting for their reaction he pulled a chord and a crannogman appeared in the doorway. “This man will escort you to your rooms. As soon as you have refreshed yourselves we will enjoy supper in my hall. My man will show you the way there as well. I hope you can tell me about your travels during our meal. I’d love to hear more about the Stormlands. You are the first visitors we have received from that part of the realm.” Lord Reed had tabled the delicate topic for now.

“No talk of prophesies at the dinner table. I get it.” Lord Dondarrion promised and both men
followed their appointed guide out.

Lord Reed closed his eyes. ‘If this is how the others feel when I reveal my sometimes vague green dreams, I finally can commiserate with their frustration. He fervently hoped the Old Gods would be willing to provide him with their guidance tonight.

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The next morning Lord Reed felt much better. Even though the Old Gods had not given him another premonition, they had been unequivocal in relaying to him that his guests were trustworthy. He was grateful now that they had come all the way to warn him about Stannis Baratheon posing a threat to his Prince’s cause. He did not disclose Jon’s true identity but told them that the one they called the Prince Who Was Promised went by the name of Jon Celtigar to hide his royal lineage for now and was currently at the Wall more specifically at Castle Black. He added that the Old Gods had proclaimed his Prince to be the shield that will guard the realms of men against the Long Night a long time ago.

Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarrion accepted his answer without blinking and enquired no further. The three men shared the belief that the Long Night and the Darkness were just different terms their Gods used to describe the same evil. The two travellers thanked Lord Reed for his hospitality and left immediately after breaking their fast. They were heading to Storm’s End investigate the actions of the false Prince and his Red Priestess so they would learn how to stop them from endangering the realms of men with their deluded cause.

Lord Reed watched them disappear from his sight and hurried to his solar to prepare several messages.

Part two: The Vale of Arryn

Lord Yohn Royce contemplated the scroll he received from Winterfell. He knew way before he read the message from Lord Stark that the situation at the Vale was deteriorating. Ever since his last conversation with Lysa Arryn, about fostering options for her son, the woman had isolated herself high up in the Eyrie and had cut off all communications with the other houses in the Vale. He feared for the wellbeing of Lord Arryn’s son, the future Warden of the Vale. The woman was unstable, if not mad outright and had totally hampered the development of her son. The nine year old boy still suckled at his mother’s breast, never left her side and had uncontrolled anger outbursts that were typical for a three year old.

The only thing that went up the mountain for now, were the donkeys guided by female servants loyal to Lady Arryn, carrying baskets with food and drink. The few servants and small retinue of guards that had been allowed to stay in her presence were virtual prisoners up there. She had sent all the others down a sennight ago.

He wondered how he could get to the boy without bloodshed. The Eyrie was an impregnable fortress. As leader of the Vale’s forces, neither the Bloody Gate at the mouth of the Vale nor the two Moon Gates could hold him back. It would take him no more than two intimidating sentences to convince the guards to ignore Lady Arryn’s orders. It was the steep, narrow mountain path, the only way to reach the Eyrie that took most of the day to climb that presented the problem. He feared the
guards high up the mountain under direct orders of Lysa Arryn would attack any approaching party by dropping rocks, boulders or even oil. Strategically positioned archers were a danger as well. Unless he could figure out a way to get these guards on his side, it would be mere suicide to start the long ascend along the narrow mountain path where a man needed all his concentration not to take a false step and fall to his death.

He had thought of tampering with the daily shipments of ale and wine adding a touch of the shade of night to it to drug the remaining adults in the Eyrie. There were however two big issues with that plan. First of all it would risk the already precarious health of Robin Arryn since you could not be sure what Lysa permitted the boy to drink. But also the plan was not fool proof plan since one could not be certain that the guards would all receive their drinks at the same time. The drug would only keep them asleep for part of the day.

The message from the Lord of Winterfell had convinced him to take the only action he could come up with for now. He had dispatched some of his finest archers to a mountaintop situated between the Giant’s Lance on which top the Eyrie was situated and King’s Landing. If they could shoot down the ravens that flew to and from the capital, he could stop Peter Baelish from further poisoning the mind of Lady Arryn. If the treasonous coward really wanted to marry her, become Lord of the Vale and conspire to put Robin Arryn on the Iron Throne, he would have to come up to the Vale himself to convince her. And when he did, Lord Royce would be waiting for him.

Meanwhile he still needed to think of a way to infiltrate the Eyrie. The only plan he had in motion was his search for a female servant, someone not only indubitably loyal to him but also willing to take the risk. She would be tasked to get subtle messages to the guards. These men were surely getting desperate. Not only were they isolated from friends and family, they also were obligated to obey the ridiculous orders of a paranoid woman who was growing more erratic by the day. He only needed to get a handful to cooperate with them. It could work. It would only take a while.

If not for the boy, he would just poison the murderous bitch and be done with it. If Eddard Stark wrote that Lysa Arryn and Littlefinger had conspired to murder the former Hand of the King who had been their highly respected Lord Paramount and Warden of the East for decades, Yohn Royce didn’t doubt it was true. The bitch would have to die but he agreed with the constraint Lord Eddard Stark had insisted upon. By no means should they take any action that could potentially endanger Robin Arryn.

The message ended with a vague warning not to turn away help should it arrive from the skies. As if Yohn Royce was in a position to turn away any help at this point. It was high time they eliminated that mad woman before she harmed herself and her son.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter Jon needs to find sanctuary.
Prince Oberyn boasts about his accomplishments.

I am going abroad with friends next week so worst case scenario I will post my next chapter with a delay of 7 days.
Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

Jon is in trouble and needs to find sanctuary.
Prince Oberyn meets Howland Reed.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place right after the events of “Changing priorities” and will span the time before and during the royal visit at Winterfell. This means Jon’s interim visit to Winterfell from last chapter has not happened yet.

Bear with me and hopefully all will become clear. If not you can always contact me by leaving a comment. I will try to answer your questions without revealing important spoilers.
The interlude takes place in a very near future
I also have VERY GOOD NEWS. Ravenousreadr has agreed to become my beta. She has already helped me improve chapters 1-16 substantially. Those amongst you, who like to revisit previous chapters will notice the difference. Not only is she a welcome help to avoid spelling and grammar errors, she is also a wonderful adviser and has a thorough knowledge and understanding of GRRM’s universe.
That said, I take full responsibility for any errors or plot-holes still in there since I am the one who created them in the first place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once more it was almost dark when Jon arrived at Castle Black without alerting the Night’s Watch to his mode of transportation. To his surprise the south gate opened before he had the chance to knock. Jon looked hesitant but relaxed when he saw it was Jaremy Rykker, the Master at Arms who let him in. Jon greeted the other guards with a nod and walked beside Rykker to the building where his great-great-uncle had his quarters.

“Thank you Ser Jaremy. I understand you got the message from Ser Gerold Hightower?”

“Yes my Prince. Can I say it is an honour to be singled out to guard you? You cannot possibly understand what it means to us Targaryen supporters to find out that a true son of our beloved Prince Rhaegar is alive and well and that the three missing Kingsguard survived. I hope one day I will witness you riding your dragon with my very own eyes. And please, just call me Rykker. At the Wall we relinquish our titles when we say our vows.”

“It is me who should thank you for your devotion to my family. I am sorry that you have been living in exile all these years because of it. Can you tell me who at Castle Black knows of my true identity?”

“Well the Lord Commander, Maester Aemon of course and I have taken the liberty to tell my friend
Gyles Stokeworth. He was sent to the Wall the same day as me. We fought side by side at the Trident. We both have sworn in the presence of Maester Aemon that we will do anything we can to keep you safe while you are with us at the Wall. The Lord Commander has begrudgingly agreed to release us from our normal duties for the entire duration of your stay. After hearing the reports from the scouting party, he would be a fool not to realise that you are a powerful ally and it is not in the interest of the Night’s Watch to let something happen to you here.”

“It is still not clear to me what the other brothers of the Night’s Watch know about all of this exactly. You say only four people are aware of my true identity, but surely the scouting party must have informed them they received help from a person on a dragon?”

“I am told both your great-great-uncle and your Stark uncle will fill you in, my Prince. I think you will find them both in here.” Rykker opened the door and made room for Jon enter the chamber where he spent such a lot of time years before. “I’ll be right outside if you need anything.” Rykker closed the door a soon as Jon had entered.

Jon’s eyes were still adjusting to the faintly lit room when he got pulled into a tight embrace by his Uncle Benjen. “I’m so glad to see you are safe and sound, Uncle.” Jon told him whilst hugging him back.

“No more than I am to be safe and still very much alive.” His uncle laughed. “Come and sit with us by the fire.”

Jon went to the armchair where is elderly uncle was resting with his eyes closed. Aemon Targaryen had lost even more weight and looked to be on death’s door. “Is he awake?” Jon asked.

“I’m sure he won’t mind that you wake him up if he isn’t.” His Stark uncle replied. “He asks after your whereabouts every time I dare to show my face in here. Apparently he still has something of great importance to relay to you. Go easy on him Jon and don’t tire him out too much. I do not think he will live for much longer.” Benjen Stark’s look of concern was for his nephew though. He had witnessed all too often how the young man relished each letter from his great-great-uncle and lived by the man’s guidelines. Benjen had once overheard Jon talk to Sam about the duty and responsibilities of a dragonrider of House Targaryen and how he needed to abide by a strict moral code without going into the particulars.

Jon dropped to his knees before his uncle’s chair.

“Uncle Aemon?” Jon carefully touched his shoulder. Uncle Aemon?”

The old man stirred and opened one blind eye. Taking that as a sign of his uncle being conscious enough to understand him, Jon spoke gently to him once more. “It is me Aegon. I am back, Uncle. Shall we let you sleep and talk in the morning or do you prefer to talk to me now?”

Jon saw his great-great-uncle make an effort to become fully awake. The wrinkled skin around his mouth became even more pronounced when the old man tried to speak. “Egg? Is that you? Can you bring me some water please?” His voice sounded hoarse.

“Uncle Benjen?” Jon asked. “Would you be willing to leave us alone please? I know Uncle Aemon will greatly appreciate that. If you let me know where your quarters are then I will come to you after we are done talking here. Could you also enquire where I may sleep tonight please?”

“Of course, Jon. I have a room in the west tower. Rykker will escort you there. I happen to know they have granted you the room next to mine. Take all the time you need here but do not forget I really would like to see you before you retire.” Uncle Benjen had reached the door by the time he
stopped talking. Jon nodded and exchanged a warm look with his uncle who smiled encouragingly at him before closing the door behind him. Jon filled a cup with water using the jug that stood on a table near the window and handed it to his great-great-uncle.

The old man took a few small sips and smacked his lips. “I am glad you are here, Aegon.” His voice still cracked and he paused to take another sip. He cleared his throat and tried again. “When you did not come back with the scouting party and I heard you had returned to your ships, I despaired you would not visit me again in time. My days are numbered, my dearest Nephew. And I do not have the option to put the things I still have to tell you in writing.” His voice got weaker at the end of this little speech and he started to cough.

“Here Uncle, take another sip and try to speak slowly. Are you sure you want to do this tonight? We have all the time in the world. I promise I won’t leave Castle Black before you have told me all you need to tell me. I’ll be here for several sennights.” Noticing how his uncle’s shaking hands had trouble bringing the cup to his lips without spilling anything, he helped him keep the cup upright and guided it to the elder man’s lips. He was getting worried. Up close his uncle looked even more gaunt and very weak.

“Nor can I dictate them to someone who is not entitled to know.” Maester Aemon continued as if there had been no interruption. “A Targaryen vows to disclose this knowledge only to the head of his house or to a kinsman who commands a dragon. You still lack crucial knowledge about the abilities of Targaryens and the procreation of dragons.” His uncle closed his eyes for a moment. He was breathing heavily. Apparently simply talking was enough to exhaust him in his current state.

“Other abilities, Uncle?” Jon asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. He momentarily forgot his intention of urging his uncle once more to postpone their talk until morning. “Why didn’t you tell me of these before?

“During your first stay, you were still too young and a sennight ago you didn’t have the time.” Another bout of coughing racked Aemon Targaryen’s body. When the coughing subsided, his uncle’s shorts breaths were accompanied by a wheezing sound.

“Perhaps you should rest a bit first, Uncle? Would it help if I asked the steward to prepare a cup of herbal tea?” Jon was getting really worried that his uncle was overextending himself.

“Sit down Egg and listen, please. I will not rest until I have done my duty to our House.” Jon couldn’t miss the desperate note in his uncle’s voice. He wouldn’t press the issue any further. However, he couldn’t help but wonder why his Targaryen uncle had never summoned him to come to the Wall sooner if there were still such crucial things he should know about.

“Of course, Uncle Aemon. I am sitting really close to you. You do not have to speak up. I will hear everything you want to tell me.” He gently cradled his uncle’s wrinkled hand in his and decided to give his vow freely saving his uncle from having to ask it of him. “I, Aegon Targaryen solemnly vow that I will only disclose this information to my heir or to a Targaryen who controls a dragon.”

His Uncle Aemon squeezed his hand in acknowledgement and started talking. Somehow the old man summoned the necessary strength to describe in detail how some Targaryens could use a certain substance to invoke greendreams. He warned his nephew that it was a hazardous and unpredictable enterprise that only adults in the prime of their life should attempt and even then solely when the future of their house was in peril.

When Jon had assured his uncle that he had committed the instructions to memory and would mentally recite them at regular intervals so as not to forget the slightest detail, his uncle revealed to
him how Targaryens could help their dragons to procreate. Jon had to make another vow to adhere to a strict moral code and to bring new dragons into the world only when certain criteria were met. His Targaryen uncle explained that King Jaehaerys, First of his Name, had created several rules to prevent their House from abusing the power of dragons. Jon had to repeat the exact wording of the rules several times until his uncle was satisfied he would remember them. Then he made Jon swear to uphold them at all times. As soon as Jon had sworn to faithfully adhere to the edicts of King Jaehaerys I, his uncle slumped back in his chair. Jon offered him the cup once more and encouraged him to take a few sips.

“I am really tired now, Aegon.” His uncle remarked as soon as Jon had put the cup down. “Can you call the steward to help put me to bed? I will see you in the morning. Do not worry, dear Nephew. I know that this night I will enjoy a good night’s sleep for I am at peace. Now that I have had the opportunity to officially pass the responsibility of our House on to you, a big burden has left my shoulders. House Targaryen will become a great House once more under your leadership, Aegon Targaryen. You will make our ancestors proud. Good night, dear Nephew.” His voice was no more than a faint whisper when he uttered this good night wish.

Jon reluctantly got up. For some reason he was hesitant to leave his uncle alone. His worried eyes were fixed on the emaciated body of his elderly relative. “Are you sure you want me to go, Uncle? Isn’t there anything else I can help you with before you retire?”

“Don’t worry about me Egg. I will feel better when I have rested. Just send the steward in. He is familiar with my needs and will take excellent care of me.”

“I’ll adhere to your wishes, Uncle. Send someone to fetch me when you are able to receive my visit again tomorrow. I would very much like to tell you of my recent deeds and look forward to receiving more of your wise advice. Sleep well.” Jon carefully applied a bit of pressure to his relative’s hand to mimic a goodbye gesture. Impulsively he leaned toward his uncle to kiss his wrinkled cheek and left the room with a heavy heart.

He almost bumped into Jaremy Rykker who stood patiently at the other side of the door. Jon tried to force a small smile on his face. “Rykker, can you show me to Benjen Stark’s quarters in the west tower please?”

“This way, My Prince.” The Master at Arms immediately complied with his request and headed toward the exit.

Jon followed him in silence, his thoughts still with his elderly relative. Jon had never seen a man grow so old or frail before. He prayed Aemon Targaryen would still be alive come morning.

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Rykker showed him the room where his Uncle Benjen was waiting for him. Before opening it he pointed out another door a bit further along the dark corridor. “That door leads to your quarters, my Prince.

“Thank you Rykker. I really appreciate your vigilance. You may retire now. I will not leave the west tower before morning and Benjen Stark will accompany me to the common room then. You can meet us there and we can work out a schedule for the next few days.”
“As you wish, my Prince.” He bowed and left swiftly.

Jon knocked on the door of the room where Uncle Benjen waited for him. His uncle ushered him inside and immediately offered him a seat and some food. Noticing his nephew’s despondent attitude he raised his eyebrow. “Is something the matter, Jon?”

Jon sat down at the small table releasing a big sigh. “I am just worried about Uncle Aemon.”

“Was he able to tell you everything he needed?” Benjen poured a cup of ale and placed it next to Jon’s plate.

“Yes he was. At least his mind is at ease now.” Jon lifted the cup to his lips. An image of the cracked lips of Uncle Aemon flickered through his mind.

Benjen pushed the untouched plate of food a bit closer to his nephew. “Come on, eat something. You will have a busy day tomorrow and will need all of your energy. Try not to worry about Maester Aemon. He has already lived much longer than most men. I know for a fact that your existence gave his life a new purpose and he has been far happier these last few years knowing another male Targaryen exists in the world. All men must die once Jon. I know it is not a very comforting thing to hear right now but there is nothing we mere mortals can do about it.”

“Valar Morghulis,” Jon confirmed. “That is the customary greeting in Essos. It translates as ‘all men must die’.” He contemplated the food in front of him. “Still I will miss his guidance and his company when he leaves this world.” Jon picked up his fork and made an effort to eat some of the food.

His Stark uncle watched him slowly work through his plate and waited patiently until Jon finally pushed it away. Then he raised his cup and encouraged Jon to do the same. Together they toasted to the health of Maester Aemon Targaryen.

“You on the other hand look better, Uncle. As far as I can tell you have fully recovered from your ordeal. Can you tell me what behaviour I can expect from the Lord Commander and the other men of the Night’s Watch? Since you outed me as a Targaryen and Southern King to the Free Folk, I am anxious to know what you or Edd Tollet have revealed to the men here at the Wall?” Jon’s tone was slightly admonishing.

“Well Jon, can you blame a man for mistakenly thinking upon seeing you ride a dragon, that the secret is out?” His uncle pouted his lips, cocked his head to the left and blinked his eyes a few times mimicking some whore who had once tried to seduce him with this gesture.

Jon jaw shifted slightly as he watched the droll expression. Then he remembered his uncle’s answer hadn’t provided him with the requested information. “That still doesn’t tell me what I want to know. Am I Jon Celtigar an obscure Lord of the Driftmark with some accidental Valyrian blood or am I Aegon Targaryen, trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and rightful heir to the Iron throne?”

“Aren’t you both?” His uncle raised his cup and drank once more. It seems his uncle’s relief to be alive had momentarily transformed the sensible man into a poor jester.

Jon did not return his uncle’s toast. He ignored his own cup and focused on their discussion.

“Please Uncle, stop teasing. You know what I mean. Here at the Wall, can I still be Jon Celtigar or is the secret out?” He saw his uncle lose his mocking expression. A frown now creased his forehead.

“We are trying to keep your origins under wraps for now but I am sure some suspect. They know you are the one who saved me with the assistance of dragons. I have heard no rumours of you possibly being a trueborn Targaryen yet and Edd Tollet has vowed to keep your identity under
wraps. Unfortunately being a dragonrider means you are a possible threat to the Crown regardless of who sired you. There is the lucky circumstance that no ravens leave the wall without the knowledge of the Lord Commander. Nevertheless, the presence of dragons at the Wall will get out eventually Jon.”

His uncle shook his head a few times and then looked Jon straight in the eyes. “I am not the only one to blame though. You started all of it by using your dragons for all to see at the Stony Shore. Surely you realise that no matter how many rumours Varys and the others counter, King Robert will catch on eventually?”

Jon ignored these last few sentences still focussing on the issue at hand. “And the Free Folk? What are the chances they will call me Southern King during the negotiations or drop the word Targaryen?”

“I told Tormund Giantsbane the Crows know neither your real name nor that you have a claim to the Iron Throne. I implied that we trust the Free Folk more than the Night’s Watch. I think that did the trick. At least I hope so. Besides that man will go to any length for you. It seems you made quite an impression on him.”

When Jon stayed silent, Benjen stood up and raised his cup once more.

“To my dearest nephew who I thank from the bottom of my heart for his timely rescue and who I will always love as a son.” He drank deeply until his cup was empty.

This time Jon drank as well. When his finished his cup, he got up and embraced his uncle.

“You are the closest thing I have to a father, Uncle.” He held on to his uncle for some time finding comfort in the knowledge that at least this relative was safe and healthy. His uncle seemed to understand Jon’s state of mind and left it to his nephew to decide when to end their hug. Finally Jon dropped his arms and took his seat again. He took the empty cup in his hand without realising what he was doing. His eyes stared into it with an absent look.

“Did you know that as a twelve year old, I was extremely disappointed when you revealed to me we were family but you were not my father? Those first few nights I lay awake half of the night wishing I heard it wrong or tried to convince myself that you still kept the secret to protect me but that the real truth was that you were my actual birth father and everyone who said otherwise was helping you keep the secret for some obscure reason or other.” Jon felt the tears welling up in his eyes. He blinked a few times and swallowed.

Benjen studied his dearest relative who was still fidgeting with the empty cup, probably using it as an excuse to keep his head down.

“Jon, look at me. You are blood of my blood. Father or uncle, does it really matter? There are fathers who hate their sons. A relationship is defined by the feelings of the two persons involved. I certainly love you as much as a father can love a son. Do I really have to paint the picture here or do you understand what I am trying to say? The Gods know I am a man of deeds and not words.” He put both hands on his nephew’s shoulders to emphasise his words but it were his eyes who really conveyed his feelings.

Both men shared a timid look, the emotions visible on their faces. Benjen dropped his hands and looked a bit uneasy after this uncharacteristic expression of his deepest feelings. Jon cleared his throat and blinked a few times more. “Perhaps we should call it a night? You said yourself we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”
His uncle swallowed but readily agreed and accompanied him to the neighbouring room. After a curt
nod and a brief hug, he left his nephew’s room and closed the door behind him.

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The next morning Jon avoided the large hall where the meals were served and broke his fast in
solitude. Surprisingly enough his uncle was not to be found in his room. Well, Jon couldn’t fault him
for that. He had forgotten to mention yesterday evening that he had planned to walk to the common
room in his company. For some reason Jon felt unsettled at the Wall. Perhaps he should have listened
to Ser Gerold. He hadn’t realised until now how accustomed he had become to the reassuring
presence of armed guards and trustworthy advisers who had his back at all times.

When he entered the main building in search of his uncle, a total silence fell over the room. All heads
turned in his direction. He tried to fight the uneasy feeling that rose in his stomach. The sound of a
chair scraping against the wooden floor startled the men as the Lord Commander rose and welcomed
Jon Celtigar formally to Castle Black. This prompted Jon to approach the high table. He tried very
hard to shut out the whispers that started up again behind his back.

“I am sorry Commander Mormont, I do not wish to disturb but I was looking for Lord Benjen of
House Stark.” He paused hoping the man would come forward with the whereabouts of his uncle
without delay. A knot formed in his stomach when he witnessed the man’s face fall.

“I presume you haven’t heard then.” Jeor Mormont sighed and sat back down. “Maester Aemon
passed away sometime during the night. I believe Benjen Stark can be found in the Maester’s
quarters. I am very sorry for your loss. I recently learned how close you two really were.”

“I thank you.” Jon stammered the few words. He had paled considerably. He turned around and left
the room neither seeing nor hearing the stares and whispers that were escalating. His great-great-
uncle had died. It had been rather obvious that Aemon Targaryen had fought desperately to stay alive
long enough to transfer his knowledge to his kinsman and that once at peace his body would give in.
But Jon had hoped to spend a few more days with him before that happened.

The cold air enveloped him when he stepped outside. Somehow it left him defenceless when a
sudden wave of loneliness hit him. Jon stumbled and sought support against the nearest wall. He
tried to clear his mind and concentrated on his breathing. In out, in out. Slowly he felt the strength
return to his shaky legs. He pushed off from the wall and forced himself to continue his search for
Benjen Stark.

He found his uncle making himself useful in the Maester’s quarters. Benjen Stark stood at the other
side of Maester Aemon’s bed and acknowledged Jon’s presence with a solemn nod. Uncle Benjen
informed him that the Night’s Watch would burn his uncle’s body that night. A reluctant glance at
the lifeless body convinced Jon he couldn’t handle staying in the area today. He left the room
muttering a short excuse to Uncle Benjen and returned to his quarters in the west tower.

In the midst of his grief, he didn’t notice that Rykker had followed him ever since he had left the
common room and had been watching over him from a distance the entire time. He only noticed the
man when he turned around to shut the door of his bed chamber. Somehow Jon managed a nod in
his direction before closing it entirely. He collapsed on his bed when an idea struck him. He adjusted
his position, focused his mind and established a mental connection with his dragons. Together they
took a moment to mourn the loss of a member of their small family. Sharing his grief with them made
When his mind had cleared somewhat, he realised he would have to inform Princess Daenerys that their uncle had passed away and that the two of them were the only Targaryens left in the world. It proved to be a rather difficult message to write. He knew all too well from her letters how much she had looked forward to meet yet another living Targaryen. She had been so glad to learn that instead of being the only one left, she had two male relatives living in Westeros. If the situation at the Wall was not so dire, Jon would be on his way to Pentos right now. It would make the news so much more bearable for her if he could just wrap his arms around her. Jon shook his head. Who was he kidding? He would obtain some welcome relief as well to have the physical reassurance that they still had each other. It took all his mental strength not to jump on Rhaegal and fly south east.

After several attempts, he completed a decent enough message and sealed it quickly so he could maintain his resolve to keep Ser Barristan’s journey to her a secret. He really wanted it to be a welcome surprise and could almost visualise her joy when the famous knight would suddenly appear on her doorstep ready to take her home to Dragonstone. Her last message had elaborated on her eagerness and impatience to live together on Dragonstone. It had been hard then as well not to spoil the surprise and reveal that she was spending her last sennights in Pentos when he wrote his answer.

He decided to distract his thoughts by going on a short scouting mission. The day before, they had sent word of his arrival to the Free Folk. He knew the first official meeting between Free Folk, the Night’s watch and his entourage was planned to take place approximately two and a half sennights from now. Jon had planned to take the time in between to gather information about the enemy’s strength, position and movements. If some of the Free Folk would spot him riding his dragon it would only make Giantsbane’s tale of his rescue more believable.

When Jon felt calm enough to leave his room, he was relieved to see Jaremy Rykker was guarding his door. When he told him he wanted to check up on his dragons the man immediately asked permission for his friend to come along. Soon after, Jon was introduced to Gylles Stokeworth. His new guard cut an imposing figure in his black attire. He was easily as tall as Sandor Clegane. His long grey beard made him look older than Jon supposed he actually was. It became clear from the first word he uttered that the man was extremely happy with the news of a possible restoration of House Targaryen. He vowed on the spot to obey his Prince’s every command proudly declaring that the words of House Stokeworth were ‘Proud to be Faithful’.

Jon took it all in stride. Slowly but surely he had come to terms with the devotion and subservience of men more than twice his age. He tried not to let it go to his head, fully aware it was also a great responsibility. Every decision he made could impact all these loyal men’s lives. He expressed his thanks to Gylles Stokeworth and gently reminded the overwhelmed man not to refer to him as a Prince in public.

The three of them left Castle Black through the south gate and walked towards the woods.

When Gylles Stokeworth cleared his throat, Jon slowed his steps to draw level with the man. It was strange to see the imposing man look so hesitant to address a mere seventeen year old. “Is something the matter, Stokeworth? Please feel free to speak up.”

“It is rumoured you are in possession of Blackfyre. Is that true?” At Jon’s nod he continued. “Would it be too much to ask you to show it to us?” They had stopped walking at this point.

Jon smiled remembering how awestruck he had been when he first learned this legendary sword was not lost and was rightfully his to claim. He slowly removed the Valyrian steel sword from its scabbard and showed it to both men turning it slowly so they could admire it from all angles. A few moments later he carefully sheathed Blackfyre and resumed their walk.
Jon stopped after approximately two miles. “It is best you stay here. I will walk a bit further and call for my dragons. Do not approach them. You are free to return to Castle Black after you have seen me fly off. I will be back in time for supper and the burning ceremony.”

Jon smiled when he saw both men’s reverential reaction to the dragons. He realised that fervent Targaryen loyalists would welcome that sight more readily than anyone else. He waved at them when he flew over their heads, northward bound.

Up in the air it hit him that he did not have the time to venture far enough north to spot the enemy today. He decided to change direction and flew toward the west coast. He would find a quiet spot to spend some time with his dragons. He ordered Rhaegal and Viserion to thaw a space near some large trees which offered a beautiful view over the Bay of Ice and asked them to land there. Jon took up his favourite position against Rhaegal’s flank and spent a peaceful afternoon with his dragons. They connected their minds and Jon showed them his best memories of Aemon Targaryen. Then he shared with them that he looked forward to introduce them to another member of their family soon. When he started the journey back to Caste Black, he felt somewhat revived and hoped he would be able to attend the burial ceremony with dignity.

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“I have been looking all over for you.” Benjen Stark took him aside the moment he saw his nephew enter the courtyard through the south gate. “Next time, please inform me of your plans. You are no doubt aware that Ser Gerold handed me the responsibility to keep a guard on you at all times. I was worried sick until Rykker told me you had taken the dragons on a scouting mission and would be back in time for supper.”

“I am sorry, Uncle. I was upset by the news of Uncle Aemon’s demise and needed to connect with Rhaegal and Viserion.” Jon kept his voice down, well aware of the spectacle they made. Several members of the Night’s Watch had stopped what they were doing to watch both of them interact.

“Let’s go inside.” His uncle had also spotted the interest they were gathering. “Supper and the burning ceremony will be interesting enough. No need to start the show early.”

“What show?” Jon asked taken aback.

“Jeor Mormont wants to make an announcement at supper. It has been brought to his attention that the men are gossiping behind your back and that the stories are getting more absurd the longer they remain unaddressed. He will officially announce your purpose here and give them the itinerary of the next few days.” His uncle looked ill at ease. “Come on, let’s get moving.”

“Before talking this through with me so we could perhaps influence his wording a bit? This is a delicate situation. I thought things would be easier now that he knows who I really am.” Jon followed his uncle a look of dismay on his face.

“Jon, at this point in time you are nothing but a pretender. You have no political power yet. Besides, the Watch takes no part in politics.”

“But they are in dire need of help from me and my dragons. I think I vastly prefer the attitude of the Free Folk.” They entered the west tower.

“Do not forget the Free Folk witnessed first hand what your dragons are capable of. Jeor Mormont
did not. He only has the testimony of Edd Tollet and myself. Also bear in mind that he is rather
disappointed to put it mildly that you could not save Qhorin Halfhand.” His uncle tried to appease his
nephew.

“Do you even know what Mormont’s itinerary for the next few days is? Are you comfortable with
this situation, Uncle? Do you intend to talk me out of confronting him beforehand?” Jon had reached
the door of his chamber and entered.

“I will not if you promise to keep your temper in check and ask politely.” Benjen sighed. “And I
insist on coming along. I presume you will want to change first and I will leave you to do so
privately.” he swiftly turned away but was too late to hide the expression on his face from his
nephew.

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon troubled by his uncle’s demeanour stopped him from walking out the door.
“Never ever hesitate to state your honest opinion to me. That is the only way this works. I am used to
bouncing ideas off my advisers to develop strategies and they in turn are frank with me. Since you
are the only one here I can really talk to, you will have to bear the brunt of my hair brained ideas. Do
not take my outbursts personally. I will always respect your opinions and listen to your
admonishments. Surely you are aware of the fact that your advice and opinions have a tremendous
impact on me.” Jon paused to give his uncle time to mull this over. Seeing him relax his stance he
continued. “If you think on it, you are fulfilling Davos’ duties and are temporarily Hand of the future
King. And you know who they say wields the real power in Westeros.” A mischievous light shone
in Jon’s eyes now.

“You will be the death of me one day, you know that don’t you? Can you distinguish all these grey
hairs that keep appearing? At least half of them are your doing. You do realise I am in a bit of a bind
here? I am the official liaison between the Watch and the realm. Defending Jeor Mormont has
become a natural reflex of sorts. But have no fear my dear nephew, my allegiance to you trumps all
that. I only ask that you will give me some time to adjust to this new dynamic.” His Uncle Benjen
left the doorway and stepped back into the room.

“So, do you actually have some advice on what to do about Mormont’s imminent announcement?”
Jon returned to the matter at hand, immediately taking advantage of their new level of understanding.

Benjen walked to the window and watched the goings on in the courtyard. “I suppose it would do no
harm to casually ask him about it if we happened upon him. Normally around this time he makes a
short appearance in the training yard. Shall we venture there after you have refreshed yourself?”

At Jon’s questioning frown he added. “Your normally so beautiful curls are rather windblown, my
dearest boy.”

Jon laughed. “If that is the case, just give me a moment. A few drops of water can do wonders to
tame my unruly curls.

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Benjen Stark had been obliged to use his diplomatic skills and all the goodwill he had amassed over
the years with Jeor Mormont to come to a compromise acceptable to both parties. Somehow Jon
seemed to rub the man the wrong way. A very unusual thing since his nephew normally got on so
well with everyone, nobles, servants, Free Folk. Jeor Mormont however seemed immune to the
boy’s charms and every word Jon uttered put the man immediately on the defensive. At one point during the discussion, Benjen had unobtrusively gestured Jon to keep quiet and let him do the talking. In the end Benjen had been able to slightly influence the Lord Commander’s plans. The man had agreed to keep his speech a bit more neutral but more importantly he had agreed to delay it until after the funeral. He would address his men the next day immediately after everyone had broken their fast in the common room.

“What is his problem with me?” Jon complained when the Lord Commander had disappeared inside at a summons of his steward.

“Several things I assume. It all started when you were forced on him as a twelve year old kid. Then you saved the day when he could not. He is a proud man, Jon. It is not easy for such a man to come to terms with the fact he is forced to accept the help of a seventeen year old boy. You are a Targaryen and the North remembers. He most probably also resents you for the attention you get and is scared your presence will stir up trouble. There are Targaryen loyalists and Baratheon supporters here taunting each other and rows might break out at any time. Only a few men here are nobles exiled for political reasons. Many recruits are convicted murderers, rapist or thieves. You know that. It is not easy to keep them in line. Mormont’s task is difficult enough on a normal day. Your presence makes Mormont’s command even more challenging.”

“Would it help if we tell him about Ser Jorah’s position as head of Princess Daenerys’ protection detail?”

“For heavens’ sake, do not bring that up. His son brought shame on his house and Jeor Mormont volunteered his services to the Night’s Watch so he would no longer have to face his bannermen and prove at the same time to the Warden of the North that there are still honourable Mormonts.”

“So there is nothing I can do to ease the situation?” This was unfamiliar territory for Jon and it was inconvenient to be at odds with the man who commanded the forces at the Wall. He hoped Ser Gerold did not learn too soon exactly how precarious Jon’s relationship with Jeor Mormont really was.

“Nothing that I can think of right now. Just keep your distance for the time being and only talk to him when you’re spoken to. Let me be your spokesman. Make sure you stay close to Rykker or Stokeworth at all times but especially during the announcement and the burning ceremony. Always carry your sword and both daggers as well. It never hurts to come prepared. We will make sure to seat ourselves close to an exit during the announcement.”

Jon shook his head in disbelief. “All I want to do is save the lives of the Free Folk and the Night’s Watch. It is hard to come to terms with the fact that I must protect myself from the very people I want to keep safe.”

“You’ll feel better once we have held our first official meeting with all parties.” His uncle tried to comfort his nephew. “You will be scouting tomorrow for most of the day anyway and perhaps the next few days as well and will have few opportunities to encounter Jeor Mormont.”

Jon avoided direct eye contact with the crowd when they entered the common room just before supper. Uncle Benjen walked beside him, Gylles Stokeworth and Jaremy Rykker following close behind. Supper was a tense affair. Jon kept a conversation going with the three men and ignored everyone else. Nobody came up to their table but the whispers and jibes he heard all around kept his nerves on edge.

The funeral pyre of his Targaryen uncle was another ordeal to get through. Jon stood as stiff as a frozen corpse, kept his head down and his face as blank a possible. He would mourn for his uncle
later in private.

Jeor Mormont gave a brief eulogy and left quickly after.

"His name was Aemon Targaryen. He came to us from King's Landing. A Maester of the Citadel, chained and sworn, and sworn Brother of the Night's Watch. At the Wall, a dozen Lord Commanders came and went during his years of service, but he was always there to counsel them. And now his Watch is ended."

Jon was disappointed by the short service, only a few sentences to honour a man who lived to celebrate more than a hundred namedays and served at the Wall longer than anyone else ever had. His uncle had meant so much to him and he had only known him for five years. These men had seen him daily. Many had lived with him for half of their lives or more and still they didn’t stay longer than a few moments to pay their respect. He abided by his Uncle Benjen’s wishes and didn’t draw attention to his heritage by giving a eulogy as well. Instead he recited a tribute to his uncle in his head.

Jon kept his vigil over the fire long after almost everyone had left. Uncle Benjen, Rykker and Stokeworth remained at his side. A few others did as well. Jon recognised Edd Tollet, and Pyp, the young steward he had met in his uncle’s room a few times. A few unfamiliar faces Jon surmised to be former Targaryen bannermen stayed as well.

Only when the fire had died down completely did Jon move for the first time. He returned to his room without uttering a word. ‘And now his Watch has ended,’ was his final thought before he fell asleep.

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The next morning Jon braced himself when he saw Jeor Mormont rise out of his chair at the high table to address the men who had finished breaking their fast. If the Lord Commander had thought to clear the air with his announcement, he could not have been more wrong. The theory of leaving behind all political alliances was just that, a theory. You could not force the hearts of men to forget their former loyalties even if they swore before their Gods. Ninety per cent of the men were here against their will and had dedicated their lives to the Night’s Watch because it was their only option to survive. Jon just had to look at the example of his own two loyal guards. Rykker and Stokeworth were sworn brothers of the Night’s Watch for more than seventeen years now but were still at their very core loyal to House Targaryen.

After his well-intended announcement Jon had been bombarded with questions. Would he conquer Westeros with his dragons? Did he pose a threat to the reign of the Baratheon-Lannister dynasty? Did he intend to free all Targaryen loyalists that were exiled solely based on their politics and let them return home? Jon and Benjen Stark had tried to keep their comments neutral stating that these were all matters for much later. First they had to deal with the threat at the Wall.

Baratheon and Lannister supporters started yelling at exiled Targaryen loyalists. Neither Jeor Mormonts nor Benjen Starks attempts to silence the room had any effect. It was just a matter of time before the row escalated and people would start fighting.

Fearing for his nephew’s safety Benjen Stark had removed Jon from the common room with the help of Rykker and Stokeworth. Other Targaryen loyalists had followed them out. Some of them stayed
behind to block the exit. In the courtyard a protective circle formed around Jon.

“I do not know how to keep you safe, Jon.” Benjen had been appalled by some of the threats he had overheard. One man had kept shouting ‘kill the dragonspawn before he burns us all’.

“My dragons will keep me safe.” Jon stated in a level voice. He still reeled from shock and hardly noticed the stares of the men surrounding him when they heard him talk about dragons as if they were this common every day thing. “Is Mance Rayder still at the same settlement as Tormund Giantsbane showed us on the map?” Jon asked. Seeing his uncle’s nod he announced. “I will fly over there then. I’ll take my chances with the Free Folk. At least they appreciate my help.”

“But Jon, Ser Gerold won’t like this. You will once more be without guards.”

“Just explain the situation here, Uncle. Where do you believe I will be safer? Here where at least half of the men hate Targaryens even if they do not know whether I am one or not. Or amongst the Free Folk who kneel before me without being asked. Send me a message when things settle down here. Promise me you will stay safe after I leave you alone here. Don’t go all out defending me once I am gone. Keep up the pretence of being a neutral inbetween-man.”

Benjen Stark heard some commotion inside the main building and ushered Jon towards the south gate. “I believe it would be best if you called for your dragons now Jon. Is there anything in your chambers you need to take with you?”

“I would like to take the few things I brought with me, Uncle. At a minimum I need the map, some writing material, the spyglass and the small mirror. Let Rykker and Stokeworth go and gather my things. I will stay just outside the gate and let Rhaegal and Viserion make some ruckus. That should discourage the troublemakers sufficiently. The dragons are already on their way. I took the time to send my feelings their way. They know I am being threatened and are coming to keep me safe.”

Jon had hardly finished talking when two large shadows appeared over the courtyard. Rhaegal roared loudly and Viserion copied his brother’s sound moments later.

In no time Jon was ushered out of the south gate by his small circle of supporters. The men who had fought their way out of the building to get to Jon stopped in their tracks and looked at the sky with fear in their eyes. Some dropped the weapons they had at the ready and fled back inside. Uncle Benjen shook his head. Jeor Mormont would need to take things in hand and quickly.

Once Jon had stepped outside of the gate, Rhaegal immediately landed next to him and lowered his shoulder. Viserion kept flying circles over the courtyard terrorising potential threats to his human. Finally Rykker passed through the gate, Benjen Stark at his side and showed them the small bag he carried containing the few items Jon had brought with him. Jon dismounted, quickly walked the distance the men had kept from the green dragon and accepted the bag. “Watch your back in there, Rykker. I appreciate all you have done for me. Now look after yourself.” Jon patted him on the shoulder then he hugged his uncle whispering once more in his ear that he should take care of himself in there and walked back to Rhaegal.

“Let’s get your brother and find the Free Folk.” Jon mounted his dragon and allowed Rhaegal to make two intimidating circles over the courtyard just to make a point to everyone, before flying north to find the King beyond the Wall.
It had been easy to spot the settlement from high up. Mance Rayder had chosen to make camp at a clearing two days march from the Wall. It made it easier for the representatives of the Free Folk to meet with the Night’s Watch at short notice now that a tentative truce existed, but more importantly their looming presence kept the pressure on the Night’s Watch so the Free Folk had a stronger negotiation position.

Jon landed in an open spot not too far from the settlement. Lots of children and some adults came running towards his landing space but kept a respectful distance from the dragons. The moment Jon dismounted and stepped away from Rhaegal, Tormund appeared from amongst the crowd and gave him a tight hug and some forceful pats on his back. Jon explained in two sentences why he had come now instead of waiting until the formal meeting would take place.

“Told you most crows are stupid fuckers.” Tormund was glad to point out to his new best friend. “You are free to live with us as long as you want Dragonrider. As I also told you before, you fit right in with us Free Folk. Wanna go hunting with me tomorrow morning? I’ll bring an extra bow for you, one of my finest.”

Jon was still reeling from the rather painful greeting and watched his dragons fly off to find something to hunt.

Not in the least deterred by his new best friend’s silence, Tormund led him towards a tent in the centre of the settlement. “Time to meet our King, Dragonrider.”

“Please Tormund, just call me Jon.”

“Mance, come here and meet Jon the Dragonrider and future King of the southerners.” Tormund shouted loud enough for a big part of the settlement to overhear while he ushered Jon inside the tent.

“And I so wanted to keep a low profile.” Jon muttered under his breath.

A tall man with long brown hair that had several grey streaks in it approached and greeted Jon with a nod. “So you are the skinchanger who rides a dragon and wants to become King in the South.” Mance Rayder opened the dialogue in a harsh tone. He gestured to both men to take a seat.

After some hesitation, Jon decided to ignore the two women who were seated in the far corner of the tent with their heads down and sat down on a heap of furs. He would follow the man’s lead. Not entirely familiar with the customs of the Free Folk, he preferred not to risk antagonising Mance Rayder by addressing the women without permission. At first glance, the King Beyond the Wall was an unremarkable average-looking man of undefinable age. His eyes however betrayed intelligence and a fierce protectiveness.

“It is nice to meet you, Mance Rayder. I have come here to help the Free Folk. Whatever I do or do not intend to do in the South is of no importance here. The only thing I ask in return for my service to you is for you to keep an open mind and not to antagonise the Crows unnecessarily. We must all do our best to work together to defeat the threat beyond the Wall.”

“So the reason you show up sennights before the official meeting is not to negotiate with us now without the presence of Benjen Stark and the Lord Commander? You are not planning to blackmail the Free Folk into helping you conquer Westeros in private and play the innocent benefactor in public at the big meeting later?” Mance had gotten up and towered over Jon during his accusation.
It was Tormund who reacted first. “Mance, how dare you!”

“It is quite all right. I would act the same way if I had that many people to protect.” Jon had put his hand on Tormund’s arm. His eyes however never left Rayder’s face.

“My presence here has quite the opposite reason I am afraid. I have come here to ask for your protection. Not all Crows are as fond of dragonriders as the Free Folk. I literally had to fly away from Castle Black to avoid being assaulted and I am seeking sanctuary.” Jon tried his most disarming smile.

Mance Rayder stared at the young man, not quite believing what he had just been told.

“I knew the crows were stupid but not that they were dumber than a new-born baby,” he finally exclaimed and sat back down.

“See Tormund, you and your King are on the same page. No need to threaten the man any longer.” Jon tried to sound as relaxed as possible. He needed to show no weakness if he wanted to win over the King Beyond the Wall.

“Same page, what does that mean?” Tormund’s eyes betrayed his confusion.

Jon saw the mirth in Rayder’s eyes and acknowledged it with a slight smile of his own. Then he addressed Tormund. “Just a manner speech, my friend. It means you both share the same opinion.”

Glad to see Mance Rayder had somewhat relaxed his stiff demeanour Jon spoke up. “Could I perhaps trouble you for a bit of food? I didn’t have the inclination to eat something this morning.”

His plea seemed to do the trick. Mance Rayder finally gestured the two women who had been present the entire time but had not moved an inch to come closer. “My wife Dalla and her sister Val. We will talk more later.”

The women did not seem to mind the short introductions. “Follow us Dragonrider,” Dalla smiled at him and left the tent not bothering to look back to check whether the young dragonrider was following.

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Jon spent a relaxing day touring the settlement with Tormund. He reacquainted himself with a few people and was introduced to many more. Tormund pointed out the various styles of tents and introduced him to several craftsmen who were proud to show their skills to the dragonrider. At Jon’s request Tormund had just introduced him as Jon the Dragonrider, leaving out the bit about a possible bid for the southern throne.

That evening after Jon had shared a tasty meal around a big fire, he entertained the Free Folk with the story of Euron Greyjoy’s defeat at the Stony Shore. He had to stop often to answer questions each time he used a term the Free Folk were unfamiliar with. The entire idea of a seafaring people was a new concept to the Free Folk. But mostly they wanted to hear over and over again how he controlled the dragons and he had to describe the uncommon colour of the eyes and fur of his direwolf several times.

At a certain point Tormund took pity on him and helped him out by starting the story of his rescue by
the Dragonrider near the Fist of the First Men and the slaying of the White Walker. The Free Folk had heard him tell this one already more than once but were spellbound to hear the joint version of Jon and Tormund. Both men made it a game of constantly interrupting the other to add more details and mocking the other’s actions. The result was hilarious and everyone retired to their tents with a large smile on their faces.

Before Jon retired to Tormund’s tent, Mance Rayder issued an invitation to join him in his tent for a private meeting on the morrow. Jon agreed but only if he was allowed to delay the meeting until after a morning hunt with Tormund. He apologised but said he wanted to honour the prior agreement. Mance just laughed and answered that knowing Tormund he would not expect Jon before the sun had reached its peak.

During the short walk to Tormund’s tent Jon politely declined several offers of young women who wanted to share his furs. Tormund had come to his rescue once more by shoeing the more obstinate ones away proclaiming loudly that the Dragonrider needed his rest this night.

“The next night,” Tormund had laughed throwing his arm around Jon’s shoulder, “all bets are off and you will need to fend for yourself.”

Although Jon felt right at home with the Free Folk and he had enjoyed this day immensely he did not fall asleep immediately. He kept seeing the lonely funeral pyre of his great-great-uncle and wondered about the purpose of a man’s life. He once more regretted that Daenerys would never get to meet the wise and kind man Aemon Targaryen had been. He checked in on his dragons but felt they at least were sound asleep. He wondered how Ghost was doing. He hoped to see his direwolf soon. If all went well the ship carrying Ghost, Davos, Ser Arthur and Sandor would arrive at the Bay of Ice in a sennight. He would ask his direwolf to join him at the Free Folk settlement and was sure the wolf would reach him before Davos and company would have travelled half the distance of their journey to Castle Black. Somehow the thought of showing his direwolf to the Free Folk made him relaxed enough to fall asleep.

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Jon had spent an enjoyable morning with the big red haired man. However different their personalities, they interacted as if they had been best friends for several years instead of knowing each other for no more than a few days. Jon figured meeting each other under the threat of death had established an unconditional trust between the two of them at such a short acquaintance.

Tormund asked Mance Rayder permission to be present during ‘the meeting of both Kings’ as he called it. Jon nodded slightly toward Mance Rayder when the man’s eyes asked the silent question and the three men sat down ready to start their meeting.

Jon started by unfolding the map of the North whilst explaining he wanted to do some scouting before the official meeting with the Night’s Watch so they could talk concrete strategies instead of doing not much more than quarrelling over vague theories.

“See these crosses? They mark the places that I saw the remaining wights when they fled after their defeat. I also marked a few locations where I spotted other groups of wights when I scouted a vast area over the next two days. The small arrows point at the direction they were moving in. Do you have any idea what that central point is where they are all moving towards?”

Mance Rayder studied the map at length. “I have no idea. But then I have never ventured that far north. I will put this before the representatives of all the clans. Perhaps a few of them have ventured
closer to that area at some point in time.”

“Do you have a useful suggestion on where best to start scouting or do I just divide this territory in several squares and search them systematically?”

“Again, I am afraid I am not going to be a big help here. So do your thing. You are best placed to determine how wide an area you can adequately search in one session.”

“If I may ask, what measures do you take to protect the woman and children during an attack?” Jon estimated women, children and elderly made up almost seventy per cent of the population at this settlement.

“You mean small children, pregnant women and sick people.” Mance Rayder specified. “The rest of them all fight. I thought Tormund told you our spearwives are feared by many men here?”

“Even if I cross the spearwives and elder children from this list, you still need to answer my question. How do you protect those amongst your people that are too young, too pregnant, or unable to fight?” Jon’s tone indicated he wanted a clear-cut answer.

“There is not much we can do except put them in the middle of our settlement and try not to let those dead creatures breach our perimeter. Do you have a better idea coming here so high and mighty with your dragons?” Mance Rayder sounded as if he had taken Jon’s words as criticism of his ability to protecting his people. “We do not have those fancy stone walls to put our people behind that you have in the south.”

“He’s just here to help, Mance. It does no harm to listen to his ideas. You don’t need to carry them out if you do not want to.” Tormund tried to keep the peace between the two.

“I have an advantage at my disposal, whether you like it or not. My dragons can give us an advantage. Aside from analysing the entire enemy’s position from high up and setting things afire, they can for example melt vast quantities of ice. When I followed the ones who were fleeing from us, I noticed they circled around a small pond. One of them fell in and never resurfaced. That is a weakness we can use to protect your families. If you know of a large frozen pond, we can for example put your children, elderly and anyone who isn’t fit to fight.”

“Mance looked thoughtful. “That could be helpful for a small attack on a single settlement. However we are intending to gather all the clans of the Free Folk in one place in order to have an army of more than a hundred thousand strong to make our stand. Your icy pond would not be large enough to safeguard all our weak. Or something worse could happen. The ice could crack under the combined weight and my people would all drown.”

“Tormund was getting excited and didn’t let Jon finish. “Yes, lure the fuckers on the pond and then melt the ice so they are encircled by water. Once they are sitting ducks your fire beasts can burn them all.”

Mance noticed Jon’s expression and knew the young man had meant another possibility to protect his people. He told Tormund that his idea was an excellent strategy to attack but for now they were talking about protecting their children, pregnant women and elderly. He encouraged Jon to finish his previous sentence. His demeanour showing without needing to say it out loud that he had changed his mind and was not too proud to accept help that was so freely offered if it meant saving the lives of his people.
Jon hesitated not knowing how the Free Folk would react to being forced on floating death traps as they had called the ships of the Ironborn the previous night. He would need to choose his words carefully.

“I have at least twenty five ships that are on their way to the Bay of Ice and can provide temporary shelter. Fifty or so will soon reach the eastern shores near Eastwatch. They could shelter your most vulnerable members when the need arises. The ships can anchor just far enough from the shore to keep out of range of enemy arrows and spears. The Free Folk would only need to board them when the enemy is close by and if they are reluctant, perhaps they can be persuaded if you tell them they need only stay on them as long as it is dark outside.”

Mance Rayder looked at Jon his eyes filled with astonishment and disbelief. “You would go to such trouble just to help us and want me to believe you have no ulterior motive? I know enough of your southern ways to understand that such a large scale operation must cost you a fortune.”

“I have more than one motive, Rayder. “ Jon tried to stay patient and keep in mind that for centuries the Free Folk had had to defend themselves from the Night’s Watch and the people south of the Wall and therefore considered every outsider with mistrust. “I do not like to see innocents being slaughtered. Certainly not when I have these two powerful weapons to prevent it from happening. I would not be able to sleep at night.”

“But perhaps the motive that might convince you is the following: If I do nothing and let the White Walkers enlist all of you in their army, Westeros won’t stand a chance once hundreds of thousands of wights break through the Wall. By protecting you, I am protecting Westeros.” Jon took a deep breath and waited for a reaction.

When nothing was forthcoming he tried once more. “Isn’t it better to combine our forces and lead them into a trap? If we are lucky we still have enough resources and superior numbers to fight them off. But if we squabble amongst ourselves and let them grow their army, slowly but surely the situation will reach a point where the remaining Free Folk will no longer stand a chance. We are all on the same side, Free Folk, Crows and Southerners because we have one thing in common. We are still breathing. This is a war of the living against the dead.”

Tormund had tried to stay out of it for a while but reckoned it was time to intervene. He simply declared. “I am with Jon.” Then he stood up and filled two cups of ale, handing one to Jon. “How about it Mance? Will you toast with us?”

Although Jon hadn’t noticed Mance reacting in any way Tormund acted as if the man had come around. The big red man started filling a third cup. He handed it to his King and then raised his own. “To the living!” He shouted and proceeded to clash the other raised cups not minding the liquid that spilled on the ground. “Bottoms up! All that talking has given me a dry throat.”

“As if you did any talking.” Mance answered Tormund with a dry sense of humour. He had visibly relaxed and now repeated the toast looking Jon in the eyes. “To the living.” He drank until his cup was empty.

Jon did the same although the ale was not really that tasteful.

“I might have some good news for you.” Jon declared, arousing the interest of Mance Rayder. “Are you still interested in obtaining dragonglass?”

“Dragonglass? Do you mean those volcanic daggers were made by dragons?” Tormund asked his
voice sounding eager. “Can you ask them to make some more for us?”

“No Tormund, I am sorry to disappoint you. My dragons cannot create this glass. However we found a cave in Westeros with an indefinite supply. If all is well, my people are mining it as we speak. The only obstacle is the distance. As soon as I hear from my people, I will fly over there to bring some of it to the Wall. I have also arranged for a blacksmith to melt it into arrowheads and spearpoints. That way we can arm plenty of people with the first limited supply. If we can stall the main confrontation with the enemy long enough, a ship will arrive that will carry plenty more.”

“Do you hear that Mance? And you distrust the man for fuck’s sake. He has put all of that shit in motion in just the few days that have passed since he rescued our sorry asses. Hell of a friend I made here, don’t you fucking think so as well? It is high time you declared him a friend of the Free Folk and stopped mistrusting him at every damned turn. He is a Dragonrider who controls two dragons. He has in his possession a magic sword that makes those White Walkers explode in fucking ice crystals and will bring us more of that useful glass than you ever imagined possible. What more do you need to start treating him with respect. I told you how we all knelt before him even the Magnar of the Thenns and it felt right. Wait until you see his enormous dragons rein fire on the dead bastards.”

Mance looked at Jon who just shook his head a ghost of a smile on his face. “No need to kneel, but a bit of trust would be highly appreciated.”

“How old are you, if you do not mind my asking? You look hardly more than a boy but already you have accomplished more in a few sennights than all of us experienced fuckers have realised in years.” For the first time Mance started to believe they had a chance to defeat the White Walkers and their army of wights and he could perhaps let go of his initial plan of storming Castle Black and escaping south of the Wall with his people if negotiations failed. He realised all too well the Free Folk didn’t really want to live south of the Wall.

Jon hated the blush that rose in his cheeks. It would make him look even more like a green boy. “I am seventeen but have lived no ordinary life, Rayder. I was groomed to become a leader before I even knew what that word meant. I can count on a lot of support and have several honourable, wise, experienced men to advise and guide me.”

“Well as far as I can tell, they are not around now and you sure are acting all decisive and competent. And I may be wrong but it sounds to me that most of the plans you have laid out before us are your own ideas and not something others are forcing upon you. Your demeanour is very revealing young one.”

Jon just smiled in acknowledgement of the compliment. He noticed Tormund was busy filling their cups once more.

“Let’s toast once more and get our lazy arses outside. I am in great need of some pussy. I intend to have plenty of fun before the fucking war starts.” Tormund handed Jon his pint and put his arm around Jon’s shoulder. “Come on Dragonrider, time to relax.”

Jon stalled him for a moment. “There is still one favour I need to ask of you Rayder.”

“Call me Mance. I think you have earned it. What is it you would like me to do for you?”

Finally a question of his was not met with immediate distrust, Jon noticed.

“I would like to send a message to my Uncle Benjen Stark at the Wall. He can forward it to my entourage as soon as my fleet reaches the Bay of Ice. I had thought to ask Orell to help me but I
haven’t seen him around.”

Tormund spoke up before Mance got a chance to answer. “I have sent word to his clan to let him know you are here. I am confident he will arrive as soon as he can.”

“There is no other way to convey a message?” Jon asked.

“I thought you were a skinchanger yourself.” Mance interjected. “We have some birds in captivity. You only need to fly them to the wall.”

Jon looked at Tormund a question in his eyes.

“I will stay by your side Dragonrider and guard your skinny back and your magical sword while you do your warg thing and are as vulnerable as a sleeping infant.”

“Thanks Tormund. I would certainly appreciate that. I just have to scribble some words and send the bird on its way. I hope you do not mind postponing your time with the ladies to help me?”

“The women will still be yearning for my big cock when I am done protecting Jon the Dragonrider. Come on let’s get to it.”

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As it happened Jon had an excellent reason not to accompany Tormund on his quest for sexual satisfaction. Not that he censured Tormund. The mother of Tormund’s children had passed away and the Free Folk had no strict rules on sexual encounters as long as both parties consented. Often the women made the first move and chose their partner. Usually once a child was born, the two parents bonded over the care of their offspring and in most cases stayed loyal to one another.

Orell had arrived during Jon’s warging session and Jon had been happy to use the serendipitous timing as an acceptable excuse to abandon Tormund for the afternoon and most probably also evening entertainment of his choosing.

Jon and Orell quickly got reacquainted and walked out of the camp to install themselves in a secluded spot not far from the place were Jon’s dragons were slumbering. Both wargs shared experiences. Jon was grateful for the useful flying tips Orell gave him. The older man had been soaring through the sky for decades and taught Jon several ways of using the naturally occurring currents of rising air in the atmosphere to remain airborne. Orell described to an eager pupil how to recognise these so-called thermal columns which simply put were clouds of air that were ascending and that could lift you up with them so you saved energy if you guided a raven, an eagle and possibly also a dragon if you were really high up in the air. The higher you got he explained the larger and more powerful these thermal columns got.

They had spent the rest of the day while it was still light out alternating between Orell showcasing this technique and Jon trying to mimic this first with a small bird and later on with Rhaegal. Viserion had played along and both dragons had enjoyed this playful moment with their human. After dark, Jon had described the mental exercises he had repeated daily as a young boy to develop his warging skills. Most of them Orell could perform without conscious effort. A few others demanded more of his concentration and he told Jon he would try to master these over time. Orell thanked Jon and told him his input would certainly help him to teach warging in a more structured way to young children that showed their first signs of this ability.
The next evening when Jon returned from his first all day scouting mission, Rykker and Stokeworth were waiting for him at the settlement with a message from Uncle Benjen about the situation at Castle Black and one from Ser Davos written as soon as the ships had arrived at Bear Island.

Interlude 17: More visitors for Lord Reed

Prince Oberyn Martel stood at the prearranged meeting place in the Neck. It had gradually been getting colder the further he travelled. Today was a sunless day but at the edge of the swamp the air felt oppressive. Oberyn removed the heavy cloak he had brought along for this visit to the far North. His daughter had done so earlier and was scanning the landscape impatient to get going. Howland Reed however had warned them not to traipse through the bogs of the Neck on their own but to wait for the guide he would send them.

Three figures finally appeared from between the green reeds. The man in the lead was clearly the guide, his short stature and green attire identified him as a crannogman. Oberyn didn’t recognise the two other men the guide was escorting out of the swamp. He saw they were staring him down as well. The guide however led them straight to a stable that Oberyn hadn’t realised was there before. Next thing he saw was the two men swiftly riding off in the direction of the Kingsroad.

Now it was their turn to leave their horses behind and navigate the small winding paths through the swamps of the Neck. But Prince Oberyn paid neither the dangerous road nor the tricky weather conditions much mind. He was looking forward to finally meeting the famous greenseer that had helped him play cat and mouse with Littlefinger over the years and win almost every game.

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“Did you know I heard the most amazing rumour while travelling across the Riverlands?” Oberyn directed his question at his host. They had arrived earlier that day and after a reinvigorating bath and some rest they were now being served a hot meal in the presence of their host.

At first he had been disappointed when a small lean man introduced himself as Lord Howland Reed. However Oberyn had needed just a short time in his company to get drawn in by the strange eyes and enigmatic demeanour of the crannogman.

He noticed Howland Reed deliberating before he answered him. “I do not suppose you mean the dragon sightings, Prince Oberyn?”

Oberyn caught his host studying Nymeria’s reaction. “My daughter is aware of my actions, Lord Reed. She wants to swear her sword to Lord Celtigar if he allows it.”

Nymeria raised her head and looked at her father. “Actually, my spear would be more accurate. And I need to meet the famed man first before making my final decision, as I have told you several times already, father.”

“I believe you were about to tell me an entertaining rumour?” Howland Reed brought the conversation back on track.
Indeed. Imagine my surprise when one of the mousy Freys I encountered in a tavern was talking about Eddard Stark and how he was not the rightful heir to Winterfell.” Oberyn paused driving up the suspense.

“A mousy Frey, you say?” Lord Reed played along.

“I forgot his name. They all have that same drab insignificant face. But never mind the messenger. It was his message that drew the attention of several drunkards. Rumour has it that Eddard Stark’s elder brother, Brandon Stark sired a trueborn son, though some versions of the story claim he is a bastard which allegedly explains why he is not the current Lord of Winterfell. Anyway, this supposed son of Brandon Stark senior I was told is a fierce warrior and apparently led the defence at the Stony Shore when at least two hundred Ironborn ships attacked there.” Oberyn’s eyes twinkled now.

Howland Reed had read the report from a dismayed and rather upset Ser Gerold and had been vastly amused himself by the erroneous reasoning that had resulted in such an outlandish rumour. He had written back to Ser Gerold reassuring the man that nothing would come of it and to just move on and forget he ever heard it. He focused on Prince Oberyn when he asked him.

“How did you react to that?”

“I told them I only heard rumours of dragons. And then I proceeded to ask him in my most serious voice if they were sure they were talking about a man or a dragon, since I was fairly sure that I had heard tell that it was a dragon that had single-handedly defeated the Ironborn fleet at the Stony Shore.” Oberyn grinned.

“That is not a joke, Prince Oberyn. A man from a certain bloodline is sometimes referred to as a dragon. You could have put the idea in their heads. And what once started as a ridiculous rumour could get a smart man to think twice and come up with an answer very near to the truth.”

“Not if you put other ideas in the heads of drunkards and simple-minded Freys,” Oberyn countered. “They immediately corrected me stating there was only one dragon flying around and that it belonged to the Golden Company not knowing it was Nymeria and me that had started that rumour before in other taverns.” His smile turned smug when he stopped talking.

“I am not too humble to accept praise for my efficient rumour spreading skills.

“He also told the Freys the Ironborn were gone and would not be back for a long time. You should have seen the stricken look on their mousy faces.” Nymeria Sand added to her father’s tale.

“Our journey through the Riverlands has been fruitful. We have thwarted several schemes. Helped sensitive information reach Riverrun and put the fear of repercussion by Houses Tully and Stark in the minds of many servants of House Frey and every single descendent of Walder Frey we happened to encounter. I thoroughly enjoyed starting the rumour that House Bolton had reconciled with House Stark on the occasion of the impending royal visit and that they were considering retaliating against the traitors of House Tully that were by extension traitors to House Stark. I told them they should watch their skin very carefully because the Boltons liked making coats of it.”

“I doubt that Walder Frey will fall for that.” Howland Reed interjected.

“Perhaps not, but a bit of doubt can cripple a man.” Oberyn countered. “I lost nothing by trying. Rumours will come at him from all sides. My beautiful daughter is very skilled at infiltrating all kinds of places and planting ideas into other people’s minds.”

Nymeria just smiled and concentrated on eating her food. Her father however was enjoying himself
immensely.

“Perhaps I forgot to mention that I also spoke about how Littlefinger has lost the ear of the King? That piece of gossip is certain to affect Walder Frey. He will even be more willing to believe it since we intercepted a messenger by accident, shared his evening meal and sent the man on his way with a lighter saddle bag than before.”

“Do you mean you stole his messages?” Howland Reed liked were all of this was going.

“Indeed, if you would like to read a nice bedtime story, I can give you the latest scrolls Littlefinger has written but that will unfortunately never find their way into the hands of Walder Frey. I did have some compassion for the lonely man though and saw to it he still received one nice letter, only with a slightly different content.”

“I hesitate to ask.” Howland Reeds green eyes twinkled now.

“Oh, I was not so very naughty. It only mentioned that the previously agreed to scheme was delayed due to unforeseen troubles with the Ironborn and that Littlefinger needed to re-establish his political position due to the appointment of a new Hand of the King before deciding which allies he still needs for his self-preservation.”

“So Walder Frey thinks his support is being withdrawn for the time being, perhaps even indefinitely. “ Oberyn saw Howland Reed starting to believe his actions would have an impact.”

“I did as much as I could. While at Riverrun, I asked Lord Tully to send men throughout the Riverlands to try and shoot down all ravens headed for or leaving the Twins. You know and I know that Walder Frey will not take on House Tully without external support. He is too much of a coward. It may well be that my daughter and I have done just enough to stave off this crisis. Do you think I may expect a thank you letter from Eddard Stark if we can get these scrolls into his hands?”

“Well, you are heading north and I am travelling to Winterfell as well. If we time it right, we can intercept Lord Stark just west of White Harbour and hand them to him personally.”

“This journey gets better and better.” Oberyn filled his cup of wine again and raise it. “To a swift and peaceful outcome.”

“I’ll drink to that. I think I can make your visit to Greywater Watch even more worth your while.” Howard Reed drank from his cup his eyes not leaving Oberyn’s face.

“Do tell. Ever since I encountered Benjen Stark all these years ago, my life has been one amazing adventure. I am open for anything you conspirators can come up with.”

“Well I think both of you will like this surprise. I wonder if I should spoil it by telling you what it is beforehand.” He enjoyed duelling with words with his exotic guest.

“Have we not done enough to earn a small reward?” Oberyn tried to persuade his host.

“Well, I am expecting another visitor soon. I presume he will be arriving in three or four days and will stay just the one night. We should leave the next day anyway to intercept Lord Stark. That is if you are planning on joining me on a big part of your journey north.

“Everyone told me you lived here rather isolated and I believed them. That’s five visitors back to back. May I ask who the two callers that our guide escorted safely out of the swamps this morning were?” Oberyn was sure he never had seen the two men before and was curious to know whether these were fellow conspirators.
“Those two were surprise visitors to me as well. Have you never in all your travels come across Lord Beric of House Dondarrion or Thoros of Myr a red priest?”

“Not in person. I know of the priest’s reputation.” Prince Oberyn looked intrigued.

“Don’t we all.” Lord Reed remarked drily.

“Father, you haven’t given Lord Reed the chance to tell us what visitor he is expecting three or four days from now.” Nymeria had never heard of the two men before and Lord Reed had piqued her interest with the mysterious way in which he had announced his future visitor. “A nice surprise I think you promised us, Lord Reed?”

“Well only if you have never met a dragonrider before.” Oberyn watched Lord Reed trying to suppress a big grin but fail. Then his words registered.

“Jon? Jon is coming here? Are you certain! Oh the Gods be praised. I have been counting the moons that separated me from laying eyes on that dear boy again. Letters just are not enough to do a relationship like ours justice.”

“Better not call him boy. Ser Gerold’s letters tell me of a Prince bossing him around. Can you picture that? I am very eager to see the dear boy as well.”

“As am I. Father told me he has the most adoring black curls and could pass as a girl when he counted eleven namedays.” Nymeria looked like a kid who had been given the nameday present she most wanted to receive.

“I didn’t say it like that exactly.” Oberyn defended his erstwhile description of Jon. “I said his curls would look lovely on a girl’s head. That’s something entirely different. Do not go blabbering what you just said to Jon. That boy likes me and I’d like to keep it that way.” The mirth shone from his eyes though.

“Well, let us hope our Prince doesn’t get delayed and we can all enjoy his company for a day.” Howland Reed’s tone implied that subject was closed for now.

Not long after everyone retired after Lord Reed promised them an extensive tour of his domain the next day.

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Four days later, all eyes in the courtyard of Greywater Watch were trained on the northern sky. The weather hadn’t changed and it was still cloudy and humid in the swamps. Nymeria was the first to point out two black spots appearing beneath the clouds. Sure enough, not long after Jon carefully landed Rhaegal in the training yard where he had fond memories of sword-fighting sessions with his Kingsguard and Robb.

Lord Reed told everyone to stay back. As soon as Jon dismounted, Rhaegal joined his brother who circled over the courtyard and both of them flew off in the direction of the Godswood.

Jon immediately sought out Lord Reed and embraced his former foster father not paying attention to the two figures behind him. “I am so glad I finally found the opportunity to come and see you. It has been too long.”
“It has indeed. You have grown into a fine young man but your letters and the messages I got from your circle of advisers and protectors made me expect no less. We’ll reminisce later, first let me introduce you to two of my guests who claim they single-handedly averted the crisis in the Riverlands.”

“Prince Oberyn!” Jon exclaimed and then remembered his manners. He bowed his head slightly. “Greetings. What a happy coincidence. You are looking well as ever. I really hope we have time to catch up and perhaps a sparring session?” Jon eye’s twinkled. “And this lovely young lady I presume is your daughter, Nymeria Sand?”

“What’s with the formalities? Come here.” Oberyn swallowed to words ‘my boy’ just in time, took the last step separating him from the Targaryen Prince and gave him a short but welcome hug.

Nymeria made a curtsy. Jon smiled and acknowledged her gesture with a slight nod. “I have not heard that much about you my lady. Just that you and your sisters are beautiful and at the same time fierce fighters. I can already tell the first compliment is the absolute truth as far as you are concerned. The second one you could show me by assenting to a short sparring session later? I would very much like your help to persuade your father to join us so I have a chance to cross his spear again now that I have grown up some."

Nymeria looked at her father. “You need to be persuaded to enter a fight? Since when?”

Oberyn just laughed. “Come one, if Howland Reed told true, this young man flew a long way. Let us all go inside and take some refreshments first. If that is all right with you, Lord Reed?” Oberyn remembered just in time he was not the host here.

They spent a lovely afternoon reminiscing, had a short sparring session where Jon bested them all which made Oberyn sigh in resignation, Nymeria determined to train harder and Lord Reed very proud. That evening they discussed politics over supper.

Since Jon was set to leave right before dawn he said goodbye to Prince Oberyn and his daughter at the dinner table. He wished them a safe journey north and promised them that he would be waiting for them at the Wall. He told them he already looked forward to introducing them to the Free Folk.

Nymeria saw him leave with regret in her eyes. She had tried to give him subtle hints but the handsome Targaryen Prince had skilfully evaded every seductive gesture she made. Her father had warned her beforehand that the Prince was a rather responsible youth who would not take a girl to bed just for the fun of it. All the same, she had hoped her father had it wrong or that she could turn out to be the exception.

Howland Reed intercepted Jon before he could enter his room that night and told him there still were some things he needed to discuss with him. Once behind closed doors, he started by telling Jon about the strange encounter with Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarrion and how these two new allies were travelling to the Stormlands to assess the situation there. They would also try to counteract the influence a red priestess was rumoured to have over Lord Stannis Baratheon.

They briefly discussed Jon’s troubles with Jeor Mormont. Howland Reed however promised him that everything would work itself out. He had felt it prominently in a green dream that ended with a strange prophesy. ‘Lion trumps bear without either one using their claws.’ Because of the feeling associated with this dream Howland Reed feared that Jeor Mormont’s days as Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch were numbered.

Jon brought up the subject of Bran’s almost fall and of his emerging warging abilities.
“I wondered if you would be up to fostering another boy, Lord Reed. I think Bran has the potential to become a powerful warg. I planted the idea of sending him here in Lord Stark’s mind. I hope I did not overstep.” Jon added that last bit just to be polite but he was fairly sure his former foster-father would take to Bran as quickly as he had once taken to a small orphan from the Driftmark.

Lord Reed assured him he would feel honoured to guide the young Stark and then changed the subject without revealing that that was the actual reason why he was headed north anyway. He asked Jon once more how fast he could fly and also to tell him in detail how tiring the journey had been from Castle Black to Winterfell and from Winterfell to Greywater Watch. Jon just looked at him with knowing eyes and revealed that he already intended to make a stop of one or two days at the Vale before flying to the Driftmark to complete his initial mission of picking up a small amount of dragonglass.

Howland Reed was astonished but relieved and together they discussed the best strategies to deal with the situation at the Vale. When they were finally ready to retire, Lord Reed promised him he would be up early enough to see him off. He didn’t envy the Targaryen Prince who had to take so much upon himself. He could only pray to the Old Gods each night to keep the Prince Who Was Promised safe.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter Jon reunites with Davos, Ser Gerold, Gendry and last but not least Ghost. Our Dragonrider does a lot of traveling though. The interlude features Jon as well, this time at the Vale.

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