A Dream of Two Kings

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Summary

What if Jon learned the truth much earlier? What if Ned saw the world for how it truly was? What if forces long dormant and almost forgotten were unleashed once more?

The idea behind this fic (my first) is an answer to those questions. Jon learns the truth of himself, and so does Ned. These truths reshuffle the pieces on the board of the great game and throw the players, masters and novices alike, in to a whole new world.

I appreciate any and all feedback!
EDDARD I

The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.

His lord father had told him these words many times before his fostering. His elder brother had repeated these same words when he would talk of his future duties as Lord of Winterfell. Would he feel as Eddard does now? Brandon was always ready to fight, be it in the training yard with dulled steel or in a tavern with the weapons the Gods had given him, he was always one of the first into the fray. Would he have felt the way Eddard does after taking the life of another outside of battle?

Eddard Stark, or Ned to his family and friends, was never meant to be Lord of Winterfell. And yet, here he is. Knowing that honour and duty would one day demand he ends the life of another had weighed heavy on his soul since first learning of this harsh truth. He, a veteran of two rebellions that brought out the warrior within him, and having executed many deserters of the Night's Watch and almost one of his sworn bannermen - he still finds the weight of carrying out his duty as crushing as he imagined it would be. Fortunately, being the lord of Winterfell gives him unrestricted access to the Godswood, and that's where he finds himself now.

The ancestral greatsword of House Stark, Ice, doesn't really need to meet with a whetstone; it is said that Valyrian steel retains its edge regardless of time and use and this seems to be true, as Ice is just as sharp now as when he first laid eyes on it as a boy. Ned has never carried it into battle with him, the blade being too large for his build to skilfully use, it only tastes blood when duty demands he swing it after passing a sentence. Still, running the whetstone along the razor edge in quiet contemplation is one of the few things he can do to bear the weight of the killing his duty demands.

And this one weighs heavier than most. Not just because it was a lad of an age with his eldest son, but because his words left Ned with three difficult potential truths to agonise over. The deserter spoke of the White Walkers and corpses returning to life. Of course, the man could simply have said these things in the hopes of keeping his head and yet, he never asked for mercy, only for his family to be told of his cowardice. If the Wall is manned by men who hold their oaths and honour in such low regard then how can they be trusted to guard the Seven Kingdoms from the threats beyond the Wall? More to the point, would this be the type of men Jon would serve beside when he joins his uncle at the Wall?

On the other hand, the boy could have been mad. Perhaps a sickness that was always with him such as the madness that plagued the Targaryens or brought about due to living in such hostile conditions? This potential truth brings no comfort to Ned, for he has done nothing more than execute a sick man who could have recovered had he returned to his post instead of abandoning it. The maester at Castle Black is one of notable skill, according to Benjen.

The last, most unsettling potential truth is that it is just that: truth. The Starks are perhaps the only Great House in the realm that considers the tales of the long night to be not mythology, but history. If the White Walkers and their undead legions are indeed rising again what could this mean for the realm of men? Especially when its first line of defence is manned by cravens with no honour or mad men with nothing to lose?

The idea of Jon serving alongside such men fills him with shame, but then what else is the boy to do? He, Eddard, had no choice but to name him his bastard son to ensure he lived. And for a bastard of the Seven Kingdoms there a few opportunities to be found, and even fewer willing to offer them. Not a day goes by that he does not question himself on whether he has done the right thing. Would Lyanna be ashamed of him? Would she feel betrayed that he condemned her precious
son to grow up scorned and feeling unworthy of even the simplest kindnesses? He was not unaware of the suffering the lad endures daily, the looks his lady wife throws his way whenever he is within her line of sight. He can't imagine the torment he must be feeling, but was there another way of keeping him close and safe? He didn't see one, not then and not now.

*Promise me, Ned.*

Have I failed you, Lya?

*You have to protect him. If Robert finds out he'll kill him, you know he will.*

That he did know all too well. The image of Robert's satisfied face as his eyes rested on the mutilated corpses of an innocent woman and her children is all he can see when he thinks of his best friend. Is this the same man he once considered his brother? The same lad he grew up with under the gentle but firm hand of the honourable Jon Arryn? Friend or no, if Robert ever learned the truth he wouldn't rest until his monsters had seen Jon dead as they did his brother and sister - as they still try to do his uncle and aunt across the sea. Brother or no, Ned and his family would face the block for his perceived betrayal. He does not care whether the realm would consider him a traitor to Robert on this matter, this betrayal doesn't weigh on him as he is protecting the only thing he has left of his beloved sister.

'But have I betrayed you, Lya?' Ned thought.

*Yes.*

"Who's there? Show yourself!" he demanded as he shot to his feet, angered at being interrupted despite ordering he not be.

Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed that the comforting silence of the Godswood had been broken by a fierce wind that threatened to rip branches from the Heart Tree. A gale that howled as loud as the direwolves his children had adopted. Still his eyes scanned his surroundings to find whomever had intruded on his sitting with his Gods. Yet the Godswood looked to be as empty as it was when he entered. Then who spoke? And how did they know what he had asked in his heart?

*We always know, child.*

This time there was no mistaking where the voice had come from. It was from within his own mind and the Heart Tree simultaneously, as if he were hearing his own voice with his own ears but magnified a thousandfold. It touched every part of him and yet he had never heard that voice in his life, not in his waking moments or his dreams. This voice was ancient, both gentle and commanding. A voice that even the deaf would hear clearly. This, Ned knew, was the voice of his Gods.

His Gods were speaking to him. Or perhaps the deserter was not the only madman on that hill today.

Turning to look upon the solemn face of the tree, he waited for the sense of peace to wash over him as it had countless times before. Only it never came. This time there was only the urge to touch the weeping face, to trace the carvings made by the Children in a time long since past and to ask why his Gods were talking to him.

"Please, is this real or is my mind sickening? What is this?" he pleaded as he reached tentatively towards the face he had known since boyhood.

Just as his fingers made contact with the surprisingly warm bark, as if blood were actually flowing
within this tree, he felt that sense of peace wash over him. The peace of his Gods was seeping into his soul, but a moment later what he could only describe as their fury came crashing in to replace it. A fury that hit every part of his being; his body, his mind, his heart. It swept through the deepest recesses of his soul, seemingly destroying all he treasured and dreaded. Destroying everything that made him Eddard Stark.

And all that was left was darkness.
EDDARD II

There was nothing to see. No sound for his ears to catch. He wasn't certain he even had them to listen with. Does he still have a body?

Was this the realm of his Gods? His mortal mind and soul unable to comprehend it in its entirety? Or was this death? Was the sensation of every bit of him being erased what all men feel as they die?

Is he dead?

No, not yet.

That voice again, it encompassed him, the words surrounding him - unsure of where he ended and this darkness began, he could feel the words as much as hear them. If he wasn't dead then why is there no life around him? Surely only the grave could hold such emptiness, the absence of not just light but all things the world is made up of.

Yes, this must be death. He, Ned Stark, must have died when his Gods had unleashed their fury upon him. Could his father and brother be waiting for him in this void? Is his fierce little sister languishing in this blackness without end? He had thought, hoped that in death they would all be together again.

And so you will be, child. Yet there is much to be done before that can come to pass. Much to be done, so little time. Time continues to flow but the work has yet to begin. And this, Eddard Stark, is why we speak to you now.

'I do not understand,' Ned pleaded without voice. 'What must be done? What work?'.

We know. That is why you will learn this way, ahead of your fellow man, so that you might prepare. Your ancestors faced the night with not only steel, but faith also. Now, men place faith in steel, and gold and other such things that will give no light in the night to come. You, Eddard, are one of the few with faith, and the only one who knows, or will know, the full truth.

If his mind was spinning at these words then he couldn't tell, he was only vaguely aware of the sense of wonder he was feeling knowing he was talking with his Gods, as he would with another man.

'What must I know? What truth?' his confusion growing. 'Why me?'

Because it is your duty. Your greatest duty to begin to prepare the world for the coming night. The night in which men must remain awake when even we must sleep. To act, you have to know, to know you must learn - and learn you shall.

Suddenly there was the sound of the strongest wind he had ever heard, a wind that would have ripped the flesh from his bones and then crumbled those bones to dust. Just when he thought he could not withstand this howling that breached the void and his soul any longer, did he return to himself.

He was face-to-face with himself. Looking upon his own face as he would the faces of others. Next to him was his family, and behind him the chief members of his household. They were in the courtyard of Winterfell. Yet everything was so still. Cat's auburn hair was motionless in the ever present northern breeze. The sky itself was still, the clouds idle and fixed as if it were some great
Now you will see some of what is to come, and has already. You will see the world and time as we do. And you will learn. Now.

And then the world was moving. Hearing the familiar sound of a horse's steady trot he turned to look at the gate, through it came Jaime Lannister in full armour of the Kingsguard. Why was he at his home? Following him was a huge wheelhouse, a monstrous thing with more decoration than most holdfasts. And behind that was his friend, Robert Baratheon, the king. Astride his horse with a grim expression. Fear ran through Ned. Did he know? Is that why he was there with all his entourage? A sudden motion from behind him caused him to turn and see himself, his family and his household bend the knee.

'When was this?' he thought. 'Robert had never visited Winterfell, not even when he was betrothed to Lyanna. He'd certainly never been this fat and ruddy before. Is this truly the future I am witnessing?'

Robert's voice brought Ned back to his senses.

"Nine years! Where the hell have ya been? Why haven't I seen ya?"

Nine years? The victory feast after the Greyjoy rebellion was the last time he saw Robert. This event could only be a few months in the future.

The scene before him began to fade, just as the last speck of white was erased he found himself in a room he'd hoped never to see again - in front of a monster that had haunted him for almost seventeen years. Before he could fully take in the appearance of the cackling mad king on his throne, a piercing, inhuman scream erupted right next to him.

He had been told of how his father died, demanded to know every detail so that he might feed the fire in his heart - looking at it now he realised he had been spared the worst of those details. His father was chained above a pit of fire that looked as if it were a living, intelligent thing. The green flames were licking the armour-clad lower body of his father, but seemed to refuse to rise any higher; intent on drawing out his suffering for as long as possible by roasting him alive in his armour.

Another sound caused him to turn, and when he saw he wished for nothing more than to just cease existing right then. His brother's eyes, wild and desperate and bulging as if to explode, fixed on the sword just out of his reach would forever stay with him. The mad king's cackling reached a higher pitch, and so he turned to the throne but instead of the withered form of Aerys Targaryen, he saw the youthful face of Jofferey Baratheon, his friend's son, lounging upon the throne.

"My lady is wearing too many clothes. Ser Meryn, help ease her burden." The boy king spoke in an innocent voice.

A knight clad in the armour of the Kingsguard stepped forward and tore the dress from a woman with red hair in front of the throne. No, not a woman, a girl. His girl! Rushing forwards he just laid eyes on his daughter's bruised, tear soaked face as she became her mother. Stood in an unfamiliar hall with bodies covering almost every inch of it, blood running so thick it could be waded through.

Catelyn's face was a ruin, claw marks ran down her cheeks as her eyes were fixed in a silent scream of utter despair. Following their direction he was met with yet another heart rending sight. His eldest son, Robb, dead on the floor with bolts in his body and a stain over his heart where his blood
had poured from. A man stepped to him and knelt over him, beginning to hack through his neck.

'NO! STOP, PLEASE!' Ned roared in anguish.

The sound of steel against flesh and the gasp of the damned had his attention back on his wife, just as the blade cleared her throat and she fell to her knees; her body joining her already dead spirit.

'Why are you showing this to me? Please, I cannot bear this! Take me, not them, PLEASE! I will die a thousand deaths in their place!' Once again pleading with his Gods.

*There is still more to see. This is what will come to pass, but it has yet to be written. Watch.*

Once again he was in a different place, he had never been there in his life but he knew it. The Wall. This must be Castle Black. Lost in the sheer height of the Wall, he barely registered the laboured, rasping breaths coming from behind him. Turning, his heart once again shattered. Jon was lying in the snow with his blood pouring out all around him. Just as Ned rushed over to him, he gasped his last.

'I'm sorry, Lya. I've failed you. I failed him.' Ned lamented as he reached out to touch the shell that had held his beloved nephew.

Jon's body turned to smoke upon contact, a smoke that covered Ned and sent him through a series of events he could scarcely follow.

First, he saw his home overrun by the dead. Their rotten hands ripping apart his people. Then he was standing under a dead, twisted tree surrounded by stones set in a spiral pattern. Ahead of him in the frozen wasteland were creatures of legend. The White Walkers. Inhumanly beautiful, appearing graceful even when completely still. Finally, he was overlooking what looked to be the ruins of King's Landing. Stood next to what he could only describe as the embodiment of evil itself. Flawlessly beautiful as the others, this Walker had not a single hair on its head, instead horns jutted from its skull giving the appearance of an icy crown. The Night King.

'It's all true. The deserter spoke true.' he despaired. 'How could this happen?'

"Because men have lost faith. And without faith in the Gods, there can be no true fear of the demons."

It was the creature next to him that had spoke. Horrified, he backed away as it turned that entrancing but nightmarish face to fix its pitiless blue eyes upon him. A smirk began to form on its lips as once again the darkness enveloped him; this time he welcomed it.

*Now you know what awaits you. What awaits your family. What awaits the world.*

'You said this was yet to happen. How can I stop it?' Ned asked desperately. 'I'll do anything you ask, just tell me how this can be stopped!'

*The truth. You've hidden our champion away from those who would harm him, yes, we commend you for this. But you've also hidden him away from his true self. You've prevented him from finding his power. We intervened with the wolves, but now you must act. Our champion must be whole, aware, ready. Else what you saw will come to pass, and nothing will follow it thereafter.*

'Tell me what I must do, and I will see it done.' Ned vowed to his Gods.
Seventeen years she has been a faithful and dutiful wife to the noble lord of Winterfell. In those years she has given him her body for his pleasure and birthed him five beautiful children. She has counselled him in matters she believed she should, and was always there for him to provide comfort when the strain of governing proved too much to bear alone. Most of all she has never tried having his bastard sent away, until now, she had tolerated the constant reminder of her husband's infidelity with the patience befitting a daughter of House Tully.

Now, however, the idea of this living reminder remaining in Winterfell as Ned intends to leave for the capital, without her, is too much to patiently and silently endure. She had told him in no uncertain terms that she wants him gone from her home. She had said it more vehemently than she intended, but her husband withstood her tirade with a stoic demeanour - which was suddenly broken when she spoke of the creature who caused her husband to shame her.

"That's enough, my lady!" Ned all but roared, advancing on her until his face almost obscured her vision of the room around her. "You will not speak of Jon's mother in such a way, I will not have it. Do you hear me, Cat? Do you?"

"Y-yes, Ned. Forgive me, it is unbecoming of a lady to speak in such a way," Cat answered her husband, shocked that the usually controlled Ned Stark had reacted in such a manner. "But what you are asking me to do is also unbecoming as your wife; to live with the son of another woman whilst my husband who shamed me is thousands of miles away. How can you ask this of me, my lord?"

Cat had no love for the boy but when he was out of sight she had no hatred for him either. At times she even feels guilty for how she treats him, but all of that is instantly replaced by a consuming hatred born of shame and anger whenever he enters her sight or hearing. Even mention of him is enough to evoke her ire. She has never allowed herself to think too deeply about how the boy must feel, living with her obvious contempt directed at him. Perhaps sending Jon away would be a kindness to him as well as Catelyn.

Minutes passed in silence, Ned having turned to gaze out of the window of her bedchambers. As the silence grew uncomfortable, she turned to maester Luwin, who had remained respectfully silent as husband and wife had argued.

"My lord," Luwin began in his calm, low voice. "I understand that you wish Jon to remain here with the rest of your family, he is your son, such is only natural. However, the lady Catelyn does raise a fair point, my lord."

"And what point is that, maester?" Ned asked as he finally turned to look at them.

Despite the anger of what her husband has asked of her, and the slight fear at his uncharacteristic lashing out, Cat could not help but notice the haunted look in Ned's grey eyes. He had had this look ever since she informed him of his foster father's death, and here it is more prominent than ever even in the dim light of her bedchambers. Was there something else causing her husband to look so broken? Luwin's response brought her out of her wandering thoughts.

"The boy's future, my lord." he answered, clearly choosing his words carefully so as not to offend her husband or herself. "Your son he is, but he stands to inherit nothing due to his, er, status. Would it not be kinder to send him to the Wall with his uncle? He might make something for himself there. Away from the stigma his status brings him."
Cat dared not say anything, praying that the maester would convince her husband to see reason and send the boy away.

"No. The boy will not go to the Wall. At least, I will not make that choice for him nor will I give him my blessing to do so until he knows all he needs to know." Ned replied in a measured voice. "I will not send him away whilst he knows nothing."

"What does he need to know, Ned?" Cat demanded, doing her best to keep her tone respectful and fearful of another outburst. "The boy is baseborn, he cannot inherit from you as our trueborn children will. What is there for him here?"

Unless, oh gods, does he mean to have the king legitimise him? Robert and he are old friends so surely the king would do so without hesitation. Does he mean for his son with some war camp whore to become lord of Winterfell instead of her eldest son? No, this cannot happen, she will not stand for it.

"You mean to ask your friend to make him a Stark, don't you?" Cat asked, anger and dread coursing through her.

"My lord, that would be unwise and cruel. Robb and Jon are close friends and to do this would-" Luwin began, falling silent as Ned cut him off.

"No." Was all he said in his lord of Winterfell voice. The tone he takes when settling disputes or passing judgement in the course of his duties.

Relief washed over her that her fears would not be realised, so strong that it almost smothered the shame she felt for thinking so low of her husband.

"Ned," Cat ventured.

"He is already a Stark. He is my blood, and the blood of my father and my ancestors. However," Ned paused, hesitation clear on every inch of the normally expressionless face.

Once again lapsing into a charged silence, a battle was raging within her husband she could tell. As much as she wanted to comfort him she dare not speak lest she causes him to withdraw when she might be, finally, about to learn of the woman who tempted her husband.

"Once the king has finished his visit with us," he began, finally ending the silence. "We will speak of what is to be done with Jon. It's long past time that you know, and you've more than proven yourself a faithful wife."

He paused, once more considering what he was to say next. It was all she could do to not try and hurry him along. Her restraint ebbing, compelling her to demand Ned tells her all of it here and now. Fortunately, he resumed speaking before she could give in to her urges.

"I will request an additional fortnight here before setting out for the capital," he all but muttered. "Once the king, and more importantly the Lannisters, are safely out of our walls we will talk more of this. Given the content of your sister's letter I will not risk any mention of it this side of the royal visit. Is that understood, wife?"

His tone made it clear that he would not be moved on this, and so she nodded her head in agreement. Confusion reigned within her. Why must it wait until the king has been and gone? Granted, the Lannisters could not be trusted with any information relating to the Starks - but Catelyn was at a loss as to what could possibly warrant such caution.
The men of the northernmost kingdom were not known for their political intrigue, especially the Starks who had always ruled with openness, honesty and honour. So then what could cause her normally forthright husband to suddenly act in the clandestine ways that are the norm of the politicking in the south?

Catelyn busied herself with preparing for the royal visit. Overseeing the cleaning of the castle, directing the furnishings of the chambers the royal family would be housed in, and ensuring the larders were stocked to meet the famed gluttony of king Robert. Her daughter, Sansa, shadowed her during her duties so that she might learn and be ready for when she is the lady of her own husband’s household.

Of her two daughters Sansa was the more dutiful. The epitome of what a lady should be even at her young age. She always wore a gentle smile when talking with others regardless of their station, she would attend all lessons expected of her and excelled in all of them - with the exception of geography which she seemed doomed to fail. Though Robb had a special place in her heart as her firstborn, Sansa was her pride and joy. She thanked the Seven for the gift that was her children, for the feelings of utter joy that would radiate through her entire being.

For the first time she allowed herself to think of the woman who tempted her husband as a mother. Did she feel the same joy as Cat when she looked upon her son? If so, then why not raise him herself with the support Ned would have surely offered? If not, then why did Ned hold her in such regard even now all these years later? Was she living or dead? Would she arrive at Winterfell one day demanding on behalf of her son? What if she was already here, and had been all along, and that’s why Ned refuses to send the boy away?

All these questions plagued Cat’s mind, but she fought to overcome them.

‘In a few weeks, Ned will reveal all,’ she thought, calming the tempest that her mind was in danger of becoming. ‘Just get through the royal visit and, for better or worse, you will have your answers.’

And so she would do her duty to her family. She would be a courteous host to the royal family, and would set an example for her daughters and fellow ladies. And then once it is all said and done, she would finally learn the truth and she prays to the Seven that it would bring her the peace she craves. That the truth would not rip her family apart as she feared.

All that she need do is her duty as a wife, mother and subject. And then she would know. Finally, she would know.
"Well, that's that plan buggered."

Grandmother's voice lacked the feebleness of old age. Sharp and direct, her words immediately filled the room with tension even though she had barely finished hobbling in to it. Olenna Tyrell had the presence of a giant when she so chose, one of the many reasons Margaery admired her grandmother so.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss it, mother! After all, we agreed it best to--"

"Do be quiet, Mace. Dealing with this is taxing enough without having to pretend to be patient whilst you bumble. You there," Olenna cut off her son before turning to address the servant standing by the door. "Fetch us some cakes so my son has something to fill his mouth with, should the temptation to open it prove too much."

Margaery admired the composure of the serving girl as she hastily left to carry out grandmother's orders.

Mace Tyrell, the lord of Highgarden and the Warden of the South, was not as admirable as her grandmother. Though she loved her lord father dearly, she shared her grandmother's opinion of his intelligence.

"Now then," Grandmother began as she took a seat opposite Margaery. "The king should only be a few days away from Winterfell, if he is not there already. Every rumour and scrap of news agree that he intends to make this Stark fellow his hand. Ah, excellent, your chew toys are here, Mace. That will be all."

The serving girl had returned with a tray of cakes and assorted fruits, placing it in the centre of their table and bowing as she took her leave.

"Robert naming his foster brother his hand is of no real concern of ours, the man may very well be as politically able as you, dear." She continued gesturing at her son. "However, the king has taken the entire royal family with him, including the crown prince. And how might this scupper our plans, Willas?"

Her eldest brother had just entered the room and barely taken his seat before the question was thrown at him. If he was startled he did not show it, instead pausing thoughtfully before answering grandmother.

"Lord Stark has two daughters and one of them is of an age with the crown prince." He spoke slowly, fully expecting Olenna to interrupt him.

"Go on, dear." Grandmother prompted with a sharp nod.

"It could be that the king is planning a betrothal between his eldest son and the eldest Stark girl. It's no secret that he considers Lord Stark his brother," Willas elaborated with growing confidence. "So if this is indeed the case and Lord Stark accepts, there will be little we could do to convince the king to choose Margaery over the eldest Stark girl."

Margaery knew it was the duty of all highborn daughters to secure alliances for their father's house through marriage. While she had long ago accepted this truth, at times she still felt like little more than a piece in the game her grandmother entered her in almost the day she was born.
Her family wanted her to be queen, as all highborn fathers undoubtedly hope for their daughters, as Margaery herself hopes to be. Still, the rumours of the crown prince's disposition did little to endear him to Margaery.

Her father's pompous voice reached through her wandering haze and brought her back to the situation at hand.

"The king would be a fool to-" he began before stopping at a look from grandmother, meekly reaching out for one of the cakes on the table.

"Yes, the king would be a fool to accept an alliance with the Starks over us. Besides ensuring the wine and ale will always be cold there isn't much the north has to offer." Grandmother paused as she considered her own words. "But the man has already been denied one opportunity to join his house with that of his pet wolf, and so it's highly unlikely he will squander this second chance."

"So we will not be heading to the capital once the king has returned?" Margaery asked, speaking for the first time.

"We'll keep our plans to travel in place just on the off chance this betrothal does not happen, but if it does then there's little use in our going there. I'll suffer the stench to see you queen, dear, not for anything else." Olenna answered with the smile she always wore when speaking to her granddaughter.

Despite all that she had heard about the capital, painting it an unfavourable picture in her mind, she longed to see the Red Keep. The seat of the Seven kingdoms holding the Iron Throne - the symbol of ultimate power in the realm. So father says anyway.

Margaery had spent almost her entire life at Highgarden. Wanting for nothing, surrounded by her brothers, parents and doting grandmother. Yet she had been taught and trained from an early age for one single but not so simple task: to be the queen of the Seven kingdoms.

She doesn't just want to be queen so she can command all in the realm, though. Visitors to Highgarden had sometimes spoke of people suffering in the streets of cities and other such neglected places throughout the realm. They would speak of people starving, little children with bellies swollen from hunger and the bones almost sticking through their skin. They'd speak of bodies of people who had died from either exposure or through some injury inflicted on them by cruel men who saw them as nothing more than playthings. All these stories had broke her heart. She, who had never known hunger and despair couldn't imagine living in such conditions. When she asked why the king and queen did not do something about it, her grandmother just laughed and told her they don't care enough to lift a finger. A king and queen should help the people they rule over, she grew up hearing about the mad king and how his cruelty and neglect caused not only his downfall but that of his entire dynasty.

If she were queen she would never make the mistakes of her predecessors. Her intentions might not be completely altruistic but she is interested in serving more than just her own needs and wants. Though it seems she will never be queen if the king and his friend agree to the betrothal of their children. So then what is Margaery to do?

"Is there nothing we could do to prevent this from happening?" Willas asked.

Grandmother was silent, no doubt devising possible solutions. Father was also quiet, glancing up sheepishly at his mother, but he knew better than to interrupt her while she is clearly in deep thought.
Margaery herself was at a loss as to what could be done. Her studies had taught her enough to know that while the north may not be a particularly wealthy kingdom like the Reach, the Starks that ruled the land would not accept any amount of gold if offered as a bribe - they would rightly see it as them being asked to forfeit their precious honour. The Starks were the oldest of the Great Houses of Westeros and so this pride in their honour would be immovable, she knew. Not that any house would accept a large amount of gold in place of a royal betrothal anyway. House Tyrell had no other daughters to offer up either, and proposing a marriage between one of her brothers and this Stark girl would immediately be seen for what it is: House Tyrell attempting to manipulate their way into the crown.

"I do not see what can be done to prevent this." her father began timidly, carrying on when grandmother raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. "It is unlikely the Starks would accept a payment of gold or promise of regular food shipments, we could very well be insulting the house of the next queen of Westeros. Not to mention the king's reaction should he discover our meddling with his precious Starks. Look at what became of the last house that got in the way of Robert joining the family."

Perhaps father was not as dimwitted as he appeared. Grandmother was silent once more as she thought over her son's words; usually she would instantly shut him down with one of her renowned barbs. That she was silent would have been encouraging, had she not broken it with a resigned sigh.

"Your father is right, I fear. Anything we do could risk offending the king regardless of whether the hand-to-be is amenable or not." Grandmother said in a weary voice. "All that we can do is wait for any news on the potential betrothal."

"Grandmother, what am I to do if I am not to be queen?" Margaery asked trying to control the slight tremor in her voice.

Her grandmother looked over her steadily before answering with none of the previous weariness.

"My dear, you shall be a queen. Even if this wolf pup chases the kitten's tail, nothing is certain. Perhaps her father will take one look at the boy and decide to keep his innocent child well away." She answered. "I doubt the north has escaped the rumours of his cruelty and self-important behaviour. Nor would they have prepared their daughter for dealing with such a creature as we have you."

Grandmother reached across and took Margaery's hand in her own. With that smile reserved only for her she further reassured her granddaughter.

"The game is yet to begin in full, my dear. And we're not quite out of the running just yet, hmm?"

Feeling more at ease now, Margaery allowed herself to imagine her future. She and her husband ruling the realm together, saving their people from hunger and the abuse of the cruel. Her husband riding off to defend their people with her favour tied around his wrist, Margaery governing the realm by herself with gentleness in his absence - and the faces of her people looking at her with love and adoration.

Yes, perhaps she may have this future. Grandmother has yet to fail her. Perhaps she and her future husband can ensure the realm does as the words of House Tyrell instruct under their rule and help it to grow stronger than ever.
Winterfell is changing.

Jon could feel it in his bones as he looked around the bustling courtyard. It wasn't the impending royal visit that was causing these changes, at least not the kind that Jon was intuitively aware of. No, he first noticed these changes the morning after he and his family had found the direwolf pups.

Winterfell has been his home all his life. Everywhere he looks causes him to recollect events that happened there. On his brightest days he can honestly tell himself that he has more happy memories than he does unhappy ones. Even on his gloomiest of days he still knows this to be true. It's the memories he doesn't have that haunt him; the memory of a mother's embrace, the memory of being introduced proudly with his siblings, the memory of being named Stark. All those memories he would never make are the ones that keep him up at night wishing for his father, or his brothers and sisters, or even lady Catelyn to knock on his door and check he is well and to see him off to sleep. They never came to him, and most likely they never will, not that he wants it now he's a man grown. It still haunts him, though.

He had learnt the truth of himself so long ago now that he can't remember a time he didn't know what a bastard was. He knew he was much more fortunate than others with a bastard's name - even being acknowledged as one was more than most had. Jon had been raised alongside his half-siblings, he'd received an education and training in combat and he had never wanted for food or warmth. As grateful as he is for all that he has, it is nowhere near enough to ease the loneliness that has plagued him since learning of his being different to his brothers and sisters.

His brooding was interrupted by a light scratching sensation on his shins. Looking down, he smiled as he saw his newest friend attempting to climb up his legs.

"Hey, boy." He said squatting down to stroke his snowy white fur. "How are you liking your new home?"

Of course he wasn't expecting the wolf to give him a detailed report of Winterfell in his opinion, but any sound at all would have been welcome. His pup, unlike those of his siblings, had yet to make a single noise. It worried Jon, thinking it some kind of birth defect, recalling Theon calling his wolf the runt of the litter. Would Jon not have the same amount of time with his wolf as his siblings would theirs? He'd only had him for a few weeks but he felt such a strong affinity with the exotic looking wolf that he had never had before, it would hurt him deeply to lose his little friend before truly getting to know him - yet more unmade memories that would haunt him.

'What does Greyjoy know about direwolves? About as much as anyone this side of the wall, even less than that, most likely.' He reassured himself.

Of the six pups they had found it was only his who had opened their eyes and ventured away from the rotting corpse of the mother. Even now it was only Robb's and Bran's wolves that had the confidence to voluntarily leave their masters sides and explore on their own for short periods. His pup spent as much time away from Jon as he did with him, it was only at night when he knew for certain where the wolf would be; he sleeps in Jon's room with him unlike his sibling's wolves. Lady Catelyn had forbidden her children from having their wolves in their bedchambers, it took days of pleading from all of them before she allowed them inside at all. Not Jon though, she didn't care enough to deal with him and his wolf.

'Perhaps she's hoping he'll turn feral and rip my throat out in my sleep.' Jon said to himself bitterly.
Quickly dismissing the thought before it swept him away, he decided to do something to occupy his wandering mind. What he could do he wasn't sure with all of Winterfell frantically preparing for the royal visit. Still, better to look for something to do around the castle instead of searching his mind for something else to brood over.

"Come on, boy," He said as he bent down to scoop up the little wolf. "Let's see what we can busy ourselves with, eh?"

He knew that Robb would be holed up with father, going over and over everything that would be expected of him as the lord's heir during the king’s stay with them. Arya and Sansa would be in their lessons with septa Mordane. Arya must be seething with boredom, unlike Sansa, their proper lady of a sister. Bran would most likely be with father and Robb, wishing to hear all about the knights that would be accompanying the king. His youngest brother, Rickon, would be with his mother as she made her rounds ensuring all is set for the royal family’s arrival.

He would have happily gone to the training yard and occupied himself with some practice, but he preferred staying away from the hotspots whilst lady Catelyn was hovering around. No doubt she'd be ordering ser Rodrik to make certain even the training dummies were wearing their best sacks with not a straw out of place, and that the footprints in the sparring ring were left there by only the finest of boots.

'Southerners' He thought, rolling his eyes.

Her feelings for Jon were well-known not just in Winterfell, but in the entire north as well. He doesn't blame her much for her view of him, perhaps his own mother would act the same way had she been lady Stark and one of his siblings the bastard.

Still, if he could avoid her withering gaze then he would. And with there being no way of knowing where she might be today of all days, he resigned himself to heading back to his room - she hardly ever deigned to visit that part of the castle.

"I'll not force you to join me in my cell." He whispered to his little wolf as he gently placed him on the ground. "Go and find the other pups and play, just try not to savage anyone, eh?"

Chuckling to himself as he gave his quiet friend a scratch behind the ears that he seemed to really enjoy, he headed for his room as the wolf pup darted off between the feet of the servants thronging the courtyard.

'I could volunteer to help,' He thought. 'But then, most the staff share lady Catelyn's disdain for me, they'd probably report me to her for plotting something.'

Trying not to feel bitter as he entered the secluded section of the castle his room was in, he distracted himself by trying to come up with a name for his wolf. It was only he and Bran who had not yet done so. Robb had called his Grey Wind, due to his pup being swift even with its tiny legs; Arya had named hers Nymeria; Sansa had of course given hers the name Lady and little Rickon, they assumed, had called his black wolf Shaggydog - at least he had the excuse of being little more than a babe for his lack of imagination.

Jon doesn't know why Bran had not yet named his wolf, he assumed he would name him after one of his heroes as Arya had done. Jon was sure Bran was closer than he was to naming his own pup.

Nothing seemed to fit the silent wolf. And having grown up with a name he hated and had caused him to be hated, he wasn't going to foist anything less than the perfect name on his littlest friend.
Arriving at the door to his room he noticed that it stood ajar. Puzzled at who would be in his quarters, he opened it the rest of the way and entered.

Nothing seemed to be out of place and no one was in there with him. It was not a large room like those of his siblings, his only furnishings being a bed, desk and chair and a washbasin. None of which appear to have been disturbed.

Perhaps father had come looking for him earlier. He was the only one who visited him here, lady Catelyn didn't think it proper for her children to be in the bedchambers of a bastard - even their own brother. The servants didn't tend to his room, at his own request; it didn't feel right to have others do for him what he can do for himself.

Closing the door and making his way over to his desk, as he pulled out the chair to sit down a flash of movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Turning to look at the emerging form of his youngest sister, he chuckled at her dust-caked dress and face as she finished crawling out from under his bed.

"If you don't even know the correct part of the bed to lie on," Jon said with a grin spreading over his face. "Perhaps you shouldn't skip your lessons, little sister."

Arya scowled at him, brushing her hair out of her face and plonking herself on his bed, swinging her feet back and forth.

"This is the only place I know that septa and mother won't come looking for me." She said as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

'Funny, avoiding your mother is the reason I came here as well.' He joked to himself.

Arya was aware of her mother's treatment of Jon, just like everyone else. Unlike everyone else, however, she never failed to show her anger at her favourite brother being treated in such a way. Out of all his siblings, Arya was his favourite. They even look alike, she being the only one besides Jon to inherit the Stark looks.

"Why do you need to hide from them at all? The day has barely begun, you can't have caused that much trouble yet, surely." Jon teased.

"I don't want to sit around sewing and talking about what the princess will be like," Arya huffed. "So I didn't bother going to my lessons, if you could even call them that. Sansa is lady enough for the two of us, they might not even notice me missing."

"I see. So there's no need for you to be hiding out here then, is there?" He asked, amused as always at his sister's aversion to all things ladylike.

"Septa Mordane hates me, she'll tell mother as soon as she notices I'm not there to praise Sansa to." She replied with a frown. "Why aren't you training with ser Rodrik? I wish mother would let me join but she says it's no place for a lady."

Jon didn't want to tell her the reason he chose to avoid the training yard. The last thing Winterfell needed on the eve of the royal visit was the lady of the castle being scolded by her wild daughter. Though if father's stories about the king are anything to go by, he would probably fall off his horse laughing at such a spectacle.

"I decided to come here and think of a name for my wolf." He answered with a half-truth.

Arya's eyes lit up as she looked at her brother excitedly.
"I can help! I've already named mine, I can't believe you and Bran haven't! I named mine after the warrior queen!"

She began regaling him with tales of Nymeria. He let his sister talk his ear off, enjoying this rare amount of time with her without her mother's scowl burning through him.

"You should head back to the septa and apologise," He said to her, thoughts of her mother bringing his awareness back to the situation that could escalate quickly. "The longer you avoid it the worse your mother will make it sound to father. You'll be for it then, trust me."

"Ergh, fine. But only if you promise to convince father to let me join you with ser Rodrik, instead of wasting my time with needles!" She pleaded with wide-eyes and a hopeful, yet smug smile.

"You'd better get to the septa then, before father learns of your absence. Bran will be a master archer by the time father lets you leave your room if you don't." Jon replied smirking at her attempt to bargain.

Arya laughed as she slid off his bed and headed for the door. He rose from the desk, deciding to accompany her and then make for the library; perhaps he could find the name of a figure from the Age of Heroes that would fit his snowy white companion.

Theon had already suggested naming him Snow, for his fur he had said, but Jon knew it was just to remind him of his status - as if he needs such a thing. He enjoyed thrashing him when they next sparred after that.

"Oh shit." Arya's startled exclamation brought his attention back to her.

"And just why weren't you in your lessons with your sister and I, young lady?" Septa Mordane demanded as she planted herself in the middle of the corridor.

After lady Catelyn, septa Mordane was the most incensed at Jon's presence in the lives of her charges. Her heated glare that was fixed on him, even as she scolded Arya, was proof enough that her feelings had not changed a bit. At least, not for the better.

Arya was gaping up at Jon, who raised his eyebrows at her pointedly in an attempt to remind her of their agreement. It seemed to work as she nodded before turning to address her septa.

"I'm sorry, septa. I have told you, my father and my mother that I don't wish to sit around sewing."

"Father says actions speak louder than words, so I tried that approach."

Jon couldn't help but groan internally. As amusing as he found it, this was not going to end well. Septa Mordane looked livid as she opened her mouth to berate her wild charge, but then Arya ran past her laughing, so she turned to chase after her.

Jon breathed a sigh of relief that proved to be premature as the septa fixed her disgusted gaze upon him.

"I'll be sure to inform lord and lady Stark of your part in encouraging their daughter's misconduct, boy." She spat as she strode off to renew her search of her wayward pupil.

Well, father might find this amusing after his initial reaction. Lady Stark, on the other hand, would want him thrown out of Winterfell with nothing but the clothes on his back. If she were feeling merciful.

Not even his bedroom would be a safe haven for him now, so he headed to another place she
refused to go to unless absolutely necessary: the Godswood. Should father find him there, at least he will temper his scolding in the sacred site.

Truth be told he had been avoiding the Godswood. The change that he had felt in the air seemed to originate from it. It didn't feel wrong - just different. That's what unsettled Jon. No matter what, the Godswood always gave him the same silent comfort whenever he came here. It was his favourite place in Winterfell, because there was no one there to judge him for something he had no control over. The Seven of the southern kingdoms condemned bastards in their sacred texts, but his Gods had no need of such scribbles and did not share their condemnation of his birth. If they did then it wasn't enough to deny him their embrace whenever he needed it.

Entering the Godswood and walking the familiar path to the Heart Tree, he wondered what that embrace would feel like now with the change that had come over this place. A change he could feel as clear as day as he got closer to the weirwood. It still felt as if the carved face was gazing into Jon's being, but no longer did it seem silent. If he had to describe it, it was if the Heart Tree had come alive - and was singing directly to his soul.

How long had it slept here? Providing comfort and guidance to his ancestors in the days that have since faded into myth and legend. Had his mother stood before this face? Or had his father spoke of her whilst sitting here?

As always thoughts of the mother he had never known swept him away in the tide of unmade memories. If only his desperate imaginings could take root in his mind as actual memories he could draw comfort from, but he couldn't even put a face to the formless ghost that haunted every moment he built for himself in his heart. Why wouldn't father speak of her? What could she have done to be hidden so thoroughly away from her son?

Feeling eyes on him brought him back to the reason he sought sanctuary here. Turning around and fearing the outburst from either his father or lady Catelyn, he prepared himself for the stern voice that would soon lash his ears.

Only it never came. The face that greeted him was as silent as the carved one on tree it so resembled. White fur and blood red eyes, it was as if this wolf had been carved from the weirwood itself and given life. How had he not noticed before? He padded over to him to stand in front of the Heart Tree, looking intently upon it as he snuggled against his leg.

And it was then, as he stood in the now singing Godswood with the silent wolf who might have given his voice for it to do so, that Jon knew the name he would give his wolf.

There could be only one name fitting for an animal that resembled the silent faces of his Gods. Only one name for his snowy white shadow that would keep him grounded to the earth and out of the sea of unmade memories of faceless spectres.

With a sense of peace and a contentment he had scarcely known before, he turned to leave the Godswood, no longer fearful of what awaited him.

"Ghost," He said to the wolf still gazing at the tree that may as well be a looking glass. "To me."
The best thing about travelling as part of the king's entourage is having the finest wines to fill his belly with. The worst thing about travelling as part of the king's entourage is having his nephew's tantrums filling his ears.

He was thankful for the wine at night when it dulled his senses enough to filter out that grating voice, but this wasn't the case come morning when his sore head was assaulted by the wretched sound.

Joffrey wasn't the only one to grumble on this long journey, which had taken longer than Tyrion would have thought, even with the wheelhouse that hid his sister from his grateful eyes trundling along. It was only ser Barristan he had yet to hear utter a word of complaint, the same could not be said for his fellow Kingsguard - his own dear brother included.

Now, finally, after so long travelling their destination was in sight.

Tyrion had never been in the North before. He'd never had a reason to be and from what he had heard, and now seen and felt, about the place he couldn't imagine anyone visiting for the pleasure of it.

'Has no one told this place summer is still upon the realm?' He thought as he pulled his cloak tighter around him.

He had heard that the North is almost always cold but experiencing it is something else. Little wonder that every northman he'd met had a grim look about them. Hopefully the women do not share this feature, or the establishments he intends to visit will have to give him coin for laying with their workers. Of course, that's assuming the honourable Starks allowed such depravity so close to their home, and that said women were not as frigid as the kingdom in which they live.

Of all he had seen of the North so far, which was very little to say it's the largest of the Seven kingdoms, Winterfell was easily the most impressive sight.

It wasn't the size of the castle that Tyrion found interesting, having been raised at Casterly Rock, it was that he'd never seen a lord's seat embody the land he ruled so completely. The castle was grim, but the town nestled outside of its formidable walls made it look strangely inviting; as if the castle itself took guest right as seriously as the fierce northerners it housed. Even without being inside its walls he could tell the architects had opted for function over aesthetics. He imagined the Starks would have no more decoration in their home beyond sigils and other such motifs befitting a noble house.

If he were of a military mind, like his lord father and brother, he would have been assessing its defences and he suspects that he would have been impressed. Even he could tell that those walls alone would keep all within them safe.

It was made all the more awe-inspiring by just how ancient it looked and felt, even from here, as Tyrion made his way toward the gates the king had just passed through. The Starks being the oldest of the Great Houses was even more believable now that he had seen the fortress that they had called home for thousands of years.

Entering the courtyard he saw that his assumption was correct. Other than the direwolves flanking certain doorways and the Stark banners and direwolf motifs, there was nothing of the usual
flaunting he had come to expect of the Great Houses. The place did look spotless and regal, despite
the lack of ornamentation.

He took a moment to savour the view of looking down on the kneeling Starks and their household,
it wasn't very often he was afforded this view. Eagerly awaiting the bath he would have drawn, he
dismounted as the king stomped over to greet his old friend.

'If only he were that affectionate with my sister,' Tyrion thought as the king heartily embraced lord
Stark. 'She might not be such a bitter woman.'

Of course, he knew that wasn't entirely true. Cersei would be a bitter woman for as long as she
remained a woman in this world ruled by men.

"Where's the Imp?" He heard the smaller of the two girls who must be the Stark daughters.

"Here I am." He said as he caught the girl's eye, and those of many in the courtyard. He grinned at
the girl and gave a mock half bow.

To his surprise the girl didn't look away blushing as he expected, instead she grinned at him and
gave a slight bow of her own. It seems even the little girls in the North were made of sterner stuff
than the company he's used to. There aren't many who would continue mocking a son of Tywin
Lannister after being caught in the act. Perhaps he would enjoy learning a little more about the
North, after all.

Tyrion's relief at finally having some time to himself was immense. He's all the more grateful to
not be in his sister's presence after the small altercation that had taken place in the courtyard. He
could understand how it must have made Cersei feel; for her lord husband to have prioritised a
long-dead girl who had been snug in her tomb almost two decades, over seeing his wife settled in
after so long on the road. Still, he couldn't help the amusement he felt at the expression on her face
as Robert marched off with his pet wolf lord at his heels.

'She'll be sour company at the welcoming feast tonight,' He thought. 'Perhaps I shall arrive after it
has begun so that I don't have to enter with her. I could explore this place to pass the time.'

He was quite eager to explore this ancient castle, he'd debated asking to visit the famed crypts of
the Kings of Winter, but decided it wouldn't be a good idea in front of Cersei.

A knock at his door broke the precious solitude he had only just been granted.

"Enter." He called.

His annoyance lessened as his brother stepped into the room in his white armour. He didn't get to
talk with Jaime much on the journey here, not without Cersei's hateful gaze on him anyway.

"Just checking you haven't frozen to death," He said in greeting. "Our dear sister is covered in so
many furs I wouldn't be surprised if they'd emptied the woods of animals - yet still she complains
of the cold."

"Cersei would find something to complain about in even the highest of the Seven heavens." Tyrion
replied with a roll of his eyes.

"This is true." Jaime acknowledged. "What do you think of our hosts?"
Tyrion knew very little of the Starks outside of what he had read of their house. Lord Eddard Stark was well-known for his actions in the rebellions. All he knew of his wife was that she is a daughter of House Tully and was betrothed to her now husband’s elder brother before his untimely death.

"They say lord Stark embodies the values of the North, whatever those are. Given the respect his bannermen are known to have for him, he must be a good man. By northern standards, at least." Tyrion said. "As for his wife, she's the daughter of the Lord Paramount of the Trident and was almost married to another Stark. All I know of their children is who their parents are."

As he finished speaking he reached for the pitcher of wine and poured a cup for his brother and himself, handing it to him as he began to speak.

"Brandon Stark. I wish I could say I never laid eyes on the man." Jaime answered in a low voice. "The first time I spoke with Eddard was in the throne room after I-

"I know." Tyrion interjected to save his brother from rehashing the pain.

"You know, it's quite hypocritical of Stark, isn't it?" He asked in an attempt to make light of a dark topic.

"What is?" Tyrion replied frowning.

"The reason why he hates me." Jaime said.

"How so?"

"Well, when he saw what I did he all but said I failed in my duties and his disgust was written all over his face," He began with a grim smile. "Yet a part of him must have already hated me for carrying out said duties standing by as his father and brother were executed. So he hates me for failing to do my duty, and he hates me for succeeding in doing my duty. Quite the hypocrisy. What do you think?"

His forced chuckle did not fool Tyrion.

"Speaking of duty," He began attempting to turn the conversation to a new topic. "Why aren't you guarding his grace?"

"The king demanded time alone with his pet wolf and his litter. He said he had nothing to fear in the home of his brother." Jaime replied shrugging. "He told me to leave the room, but he failed to specify where I should position myself after doing so. So here I am."

This did make Tyrion laugh a little, and his brother joined him a few moments after, lightening the mood.

Tyrion never understood why his brother had insisted on remaining in the Kingsguard, knowing full well their lord father could have him released in a instant. He knew that what he did haunted him, as did the moniker he earned for doing so, so why subject himself to being at the front of such ridicule? He had asked him many times and received only half-baked excuses. Tyrion was a clever man, his circumstances requiring it of him, and he knew his brother well enough to know when he's hiding something.

He'd never pushed his brother to answer though, not that he thought it would make much difference if he did. Jaime was as stubborn as the sister he entered the world with when he wanted to be.
It seems there are more secrets in Winterfell now, aside from those of the ancient Kings of Winter. Perhaps he could discover a few while he's here?
Even with all the power and protection her God grants her, Melisandre is still ill at ease on a ship. The memory of being chained below deck, with the rest of the 'cargo' as their captors had called them, forced its way to the forefront of her mind every time the ship lurched. Recalling the abject terror that would seize her every night they came, dragging away a girl each time who was never seen again. She knows now the fate those girls were met with, and thanks R'hllor that she had been spared meeting it herself.

When she was sold to the temple all those centuries ago, she had not allowed herself to hope for anything more than a quick death. She found much more than that as a priestess of the God who had saved her - and she has faithfully served the Heart of Fire ever since.

It's because of her devotion to R'hllor that she is on this ship, at the mercy of the memory of her beginnings. She had, to her eternal shame, doubted the visions her God had allowed her to see in the flames once. The consequences of this lapse in faith tormented her even more than the memory of chains, and so she vowed to never doubt nor delay ever again when called upon.

So when she sat before the flames as she did every night, calling upon R'hllor to bring the dawn and to make his will known unto her, she did not hesitate to set out on her journey the moment the visions had ceased.

During the long voyage she spent much time attempting to interpret what she had seen, as she had been taught to do in the temple so long ago. She is far from completely understanding; but she knows what must be done upon her arrival, at the very least. And she trusts that the Lord will reveal more once she has proven herself worthy of aiding his champion in the night to come.

They were a day out from reaching their destination. She didn't like to sleep anymore than was necessary, especially entering the land where the Great Other's influence is stronger. So, she decided to search through all she had seen before they made landfall.

Retiring to her cabin, she sat in the chair by her bunk and closed her eyes. Patiently waiting for the flames to fill her inner eye. As soon as she felt she was merged with her Lord's fire, she recalled once again the cryptic visions that had set her on the path she now diligently walks.

The crown of pure light was hovering in the air, pulsating and pushing back the darkness that tried to engulf it with each pulse; like a heart beating life into the world.

As the light pushed the darkness back far enough, she saw two stags locked in contention with a third already dead on the ground. Eventually the larger stag was able to gore the smaller one with the sharp prongs of its antlers and, as it fell to the ground to join the other dead beast, the victorious stag moved to claim the crown. Before it could get near enough to touch it, however, the light intensified to be momentarily blinding and when it subsided there were three piles of ash where the stags had been.

The darkness had regained the ground it had lost and so the crown continued to ward it off.

Once again pushing it back only for a sickly looking lion to attempt to claim the crown. Unlike the stag, however, this lion almost got within touching distance before the same burst of light rendered it to ash.
And then suddenly a hand shot out of the darkness and seized the crown. As the desperately pulsing flashes illuminated the rest of the creature, it began to freeze and the light began to ebb. The creature, that must be the champion of the Great Other, turned to look in the direction she was viewing the event from - as if it knew she were watching in the flames.

Just as it seemed the last of the light was about to die, the crown gave out a muted burst of light that started to travel through the hand holding it and proceeded to flow through its entire body. Anguish transforming it's beautiful face to reveal the monster it truly was, the champion dropped the crown to the ground where it fell through the earth as if it were the surface of the sea. The champion retreated.

The flames roared, briefly obscuring her vision before settling. She was looking at the massive skull of what she knew to be a dragon. The dulled crown was perched on top of the titanic skull, but then eventually it started to hiss and smoke and then another pulse of light reduced it to nothing.

Once more the flames roared. She was looking at the crown again, this time it was being nuzzled by a large, white wolf. She watched for what felt like hours and still the wolf was unharmed. It looked as if it were comforting the dulled crown. It looked up in the direction of where she was viewing from the flames, just as the Great Other's champion had done, those intelligent, blood red eyes fixed on the point.

As the wolf blinked, the flames receded entirely and she was thrust in to a new setting.

She was stood on the bank of a boiling lake, the steam it was giving off rising high and thick. It was obscuring a figure that stood on the opposite bank, surrounded by the silhouettes of stunted creatures that were attempting to pull it away from the water. She could see the dim light of the crown over the figure's head. The light it was giving was even less than when the Great Other's champion had it in its grasp.

Her recollections ended just as suddenly as the first time she witnessed the visions.

Fatigue was threatening to consume her. It was much more taxing to view visions with her own fire than those the Lord had sent into the world.

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The sun was high in the sky and Melisandre was standing on the deck. She could see their destination in the distance; the captain having informed her they'd make landfall that night.

She was eager to reach land. It had been too long since she had lit her nightfires. One of the captain's conditions for immediate departure was that she would light no flame whilst aboard his vessel. This captain would be of great use in the days to come, the Lord had revealed to her, so she acquiesced.

She would not risk forgoing her nightfires when they made land, she had felt the Great Other's power grow stronger as they approached Westeros.

In sight of her goal at last, Melisandre allowed her mind to wander, in the hopes of making yet more sense of what she had seen.

'The crown alone was there in everything I saw,' She began to herself. 'Perhaps it is an allusion to Lightbringer?'

The Red Sword of Heroes was the fabled blade of Azor Ahai, who wielded it against a great darkness millennia ago. Only Azor Ahai reborn would be able to draw Lightbringer from the fire.
The meaning of the stags in combat was easier to make sense of; she knew the Baratheons reigned in Westeros, that their sigil was a stag and there are three Baratheon brothers.

'The eldest brother sits the Iron Throne. It could be that the younger two were plotting to usurp him, only to betray one another in an attempt to take it all for themselves.' Melisandre reasoned. 'Clearly none of the three would be victorious in the end, the light of the crown had destroyed every trace of them.'

The sickly lion could not claim it either, being destroyed just as completely as the stags. Even the champion of the Great Other was not immune to it's power despite touching it, nearly smothering it and being forced to retreat instead of rendered to ash. And when it dropped the crown it passed right through the ground, as if the earth itself couldn't withstand touching it. The dragon also proved incapable of withstanding the light of even the dulled crown. Were dragons not immune to all forms of fire? Their bones especially?

'The wolf,' She remembered, excitement rising. 'It was only the wolf that could touch the crown and not be destroyed. Only the wolf that acted as if the crown were kin to it.'

That was not the only significant thing about the wolf, however. It and the Great Other's champion seemed to be able to detect her in her visions - looking right at where she would be if she were physically there.

'How could that be?' She wondered.

In almost four centuries of receiving such visions, such a thing had never happened to her nor to any of her brothers and sisters as she had never heard tales of it happening.

The final part of her vision was also as confusing as the rest, despite being straightforward compared to what had come before it. She knew some experienced visions as if they were physically there, with all of their senses, but she had never experienced it before then.

The figure across the smoking water was surrounded by enemies, it seemed, though they didn't seem intent on destroying it only holding it back. The crown, that ever present crown, was directly over the figures head - as if just waiting to fall on to it.

'The white wolf is somehow connected to the figure yet to be crowned.' She decided. 'It was only the two of them who could withstand being so close to the light.'

The crown that could be Lightbringer.

The wolf that could withstand the light not even a dragon could.

The hidden monarch just out of reach of their crown.

"Lost, are we?" The captain's voice reached through her maze of thought. "With how eager you were to get here, I half expected you'd be off the deck before we laid anchor."

She turned to him as he was chuckling, giving him a small smile and nodding her head, but saying nothing.

'It is not yet time to reveal his purpose to him,' She told herself. 'Let gold hold his eye until he is ready to give his heart.'

Finally, she was on the ground again. She savoured the moment, indulging just a little before turning to the captain who followed her.
"Rest as well as you can, my friend," She said. "I do not expect to be here long. Once I have what I need, we'll set sail again."

"I got you here, as you so suddenly requested." He replied gruffly, a greedy gleam in his eye. "My ship is yours as long as you're willing to pay the same."

"Of course, the Lord gives generously to those who aid his cause." She replied warmly.

'As you will come to know well, soon enough.' She left unsaid.

"His generosity is much appreciated, I'm sure the establishments I intend to offer my custom will also delight in it." He chuckled once more. "Where pray tell are we heading to next?"

Turning around to look at the castle that was scarcely older than she was, ready to begin her work at last.

"When I know, so shall you, dear captain." She said walking off to discover just what awaited her on Dragonstone.
Jon was glad to see the royal family go.

He hadn't been around them much, mostly seeing them from afar but the crown prince had irritated Robb something fierce, which left Robb in a fierce mood as a result.

Arya was forced to comport herself as her mother instructed, so her mood was rotten as well. Father's promise of combat lessons, should she prove herself mature enough during the visit by doing all that was expected of her, was enough to keep her from murdering everyone who called her a lady. He still chuckled at her interaction with the Imp in front of the whole courtyard the day they arrived, the king looked amused as well but he could only imagine the horror on the faces of lady Stark and the septa.

He quite liked Tyrion Lannister, despite the fact their first conversation initially offended him, he came to appreciate the wisdom in his advice. He was clever and had a way with words though he wasn't as condescending as Jon would expect a Lannister to be. The same could not be said for his sister and, to a lesser extent, his brother.

The queen had hardly bothered to show her face around Winterfell unless it was expected of her. Jaime Lannister, the man who looked more of a king than the one he was sworn to defend, was less rude than his sister until the conversation turned towards talk of combat skill. That was when the proud lion reared its head. Given his reputation as a swordsman, Jon felt it unnecessary for him to boast of his own skills.

He hoped Tyrion would ride back from the Wall and rest at Winterfell for a few days, but it was more likely he would just take ship. He had little love for the road after the journey here, he had repeatedly complained.

Thoughts of the Wall caused Jon to inwardly growl. He was furious with his father for refusing to give him his blessing to join the Night's Watch, really he had all but forbidden it. And he had convinced his uncle Benjen to not allow Jon to accompany him when he returns to Castle Black. He doesn't understand why his father is all of a sudden against him taking the Black, after he had told Jon many times of the honour in a life lived in service to the realm.

"I'll not let you swear your life away before you've even had a chance to truly live it." He had said in response to Jon's protests.

He was determined to convince his father to change his stance on the matter, because Jon intended to ride for the Wall regardless of his father's decision. He didn't want to part on bad terms with him, but he was a man grown and capable of making his own choices. He knew it was not an oath to take lightly - but what was he really giving up?

He'd tell his father as respectfully as possible that he would become a brother of the Night's Watch.

Knowing that he would be leaving for the Wall soon enough, Jon decided to spend as much time with his siblings as possible.

This was easy with Arya, who hadn't left his side since the royal family's departure - she was constantly telling him of her plans once she's finished her training to be a warrior. The lessons
hadn't even started yet and they were already all she talked about.

"Mother still isn't happy about it," She said nonchalantly. "But father said I'd kept up my end of the deal so he must do his part as well."

Lady Stark had a lot to be angry about since the royal visit had ended. First, her youngest daughter was to learn the sword. Which flew in the face of everything she believed a lady should aspire to do. Following this, father had, for reasons unknown, refused a betrothal between Sansa and the crown prince. Jon wasn't sure why lady Catelyn was upset at this, she loved her daughter more than life itself - as she did all her children. Surely after everything they had seen and heard of Joffrey, she would rather ship Sansa off to Essos instead of him getting his hands on her. The queen must have been offended because she hadn't shown herself at all since the refusal, not even when the king and his children expressed their gratitude to the Starks for their hospitality before leaving.

Finally, she shared Jon's ire at his father's refusal to allow him to take the Black. It was strange to be in agreement with lady Stark, but he could understand why she of all people wanted him to join the Watch.

It was the vehement refusal of his father to allow it that he struggled to understand.

The sound of clashing steel filled the yard as Jon and Robb faced off in the sparring ring.

They had both thrown themselves in to training with renewed dedication after seeing the knights of the Kingsguard face off in a spar.

Jon having received praise for his swordplay from a living legend like Barristan the Bold gave him a surge of confidence. This only grew when the legend himself honoured Jon with a few hours of instruction.

Jon had yet to lose a bout since, except to ser Barristan, who had thoroughly trounced him. Robb seemed determined that today would be the day he ended Jon's winning streak, judging by his relentlessness in today's session.

Robb charged forward with an overhead strike aimed at Jon's left shoulder, which he countered by side-stepping to the outside of the strike whilst angling his shoulders and head away from the oncoming blade - finishing the counter by strafing out and striking Robb's exposed flank. It helped that Robb's forward momentum caused him to stumble as his attack missed its target.

Jon braced himself for the retaliatory strike; it came in the form of a backhanded horizontal swing that he had just managed to check. He pushed his blade against Robb's to force him backwards a little whilst kicking off his front leg to launch himself away from Robb.

Jon had learned from ser Barristan that being the one to dictate the distance was a tactic that worked well against aggressive fighters, which definitely described Robb right now.

"It's hard for such a fighter to disguise their attacks," Jon recalled ser Barristan saying. "When they have to close the distance and are thinking only of the damage they wish to do to you."

As Robb once again pressed the attack, Jon decided to end it.

Jumping back to avoid his first swing, and then rebounding forwards in time to check Robb's reversed strike. Jon shot out his hand to grab the wrist of Robb's sword arm and snaked his blade over Robb's until the flat of it was against the inside of his wrist. Although Jon had him trapped he
knew Robb could easily overpower him at this range, so he twisted his blade to the sky and turned his body out whilst pulling down on Robb's wrist; this forced him to one knee and Jon pulled his blade down towards Robb's palm which forced him to drop his own sword. Kicking it away and using the hand he still had on his wrist, he twisted his body so he was facing the kneeling Robb and leveled the blunt tip against his throat.

"Yield, brother." Jon said, out of breath.

"I yield!" Robb panted, annoyance evident on his face.

Jon pulled him to his feet, he couldn't help but feel proud.

"I'll best you yet, Snow." Robb said. "If you'd have been slower and hadn't had the element of surprise I'd have won that bout!"

"Element of surprise?" Jon asked chuckling. "You attacked and I defended. Are you surprised I didn't just allow you to land your blow, Stark? I'm surprised you didn't know that's how fighting worked."

Robb started laughing himself, all traces of his previous mood gone. He was not a sore loser, that much was true.

"I was surprised you dared get close enough for me to grab you," Robb answered, rubbing the wrist Jon had locked. "It's never worked out well for you before, and just as I realised I could throw your pretty face in to the dirt I was on my knee watching you kick my sword away. Didn't seem a good idea to attempt to tackle a man with a blade at my throat."

"Since when is something not being a good idea enough to stop you doing it?"

Robb laughed once more, nodding his head in acknowledgement of Jon's point.

Putting away their training swords, the two brothers headed out of the training yard before Arya arrived. The instructor father had hired for her had yet to arrive, from where Jon didn't know, so father allowed her to vent some of her restless energy on the training dummies in the meantime. The only problem with this arrangement was that if Jon and Robb, or even Bran, were anywhere near her when she was holding her wooden sword - they'd be clubbed until they agreed to spar with her. And then clubbed some more if they dared best her in said spar.

They were just deciding where they would hide from Arya when they heard father's voice hailing them. They started to walk over to him, seeing maester Luwin stood at his side.

Jon didn't like the idea of his father going to King's Landing. Not just because he belonged here at Winterfell but because he hadn't seemed right for weeks now. He hoped he wasn't sickening with something, he looked worn out all of the time.

"Father, are you well?" Robb asked as they reached him.

Robb shared Jon's concerns, both of them having discussed potential ways they could convince their father to rescind his acceptance of being Hand. They knew anything they did would prove fruitless, though. Eddard Stark would never go back on his word.

"Aye, son. Though whether I remain that way, only the gods know." He answered in a solemn voice.

Jon and Robb exchanged panicked looks, as they opened their mouths to ask a thousand questions
of their father he interrupted them with a chuckle.

"I've promised Arya I would spar with her," He spoke in a lighter tone. "Having seen the damage she's done to the two of you, I've half a mind to saddle my horse and depart for King's Landing now."

This caused them all to laugh, even maester Luwin.

"Your father has asked me to test your knowledge on the houses of the North, my lord," Luwin said to Robb after they had settled down. "You should know all you can about the men who will be your bannermen one day. With your father departing in a few days, you will need to step in to act in his stead, as you well know."

This instantly got Robb's attention, straightening himself and tilting his chin up, he nodded at the maester.

"I'll go with you now and we can get started, maester." He said. "I'll see you at evening meal, father. Jon."

Nodding to the two of them, he and the maester departed for Luwin's study.

"Jon-"

"Father-"

With another light chuckle, father nodded at Jon to go first.

"I, er, wanted to talk about the Night's Watch," He began. Father's face losing all traces of humour. "I do not understand why you are against my wish to join but, with all due respect, I still intend to do so. I'm a man now and the choice is mine to make, but I don't wish for us to part with you thinking me an impulsive child. I understand the consequences of breaking the oath I will have to swear."

Father said nothing, so he continued.

"I do not see what there is for me at Winterfell, not now I'm a man." He said. "Perhaps if the king had visited sooner, ser Barristan might have had me for a squire, or maybe some other knight would have. The Watch is the only place I can see in my future where I won't be held back, or hated, because of my birth."

He had never said this to his father before. And as soon as he saw his face fall, Jon immediately regretted doing so.

After what seemed like hours, father finally spoke.

"It is your choice to make, Jon. It is every man's right to choose his own path." His voice was grave.

"So I have your blessing?"

Again, his father lapsed into silence. Before sighing as he nodded.

Jon felt relief, but also a small feeling of sadness.

"Thank you, father."
His eyes snapped up to Jon's own. Grey fixed on grey.

"There are things we must speak of before you fully commit to this." He spoke as if each word were costing him great effort. "You will meet me in the Godswood, tonight, at the hour of the wolf."

He turned and walked away before Jon could say anymore, making an effort it seemed to keep his face out of Jon's sight.

*

Jon was laid on his bed, once more trying to imagine what father could possibly want to tell him at such a time.

He recalled the days he'd receive a scolding for being out of bed so late, now the man who had delivered those scoldings was telling him to do so.

Despite all the scenarios he had imagined, none of them seemed likely. He had wondered, briefly, if it was to do with his mother, but then he shut the thought away so as not to get his hopes up. At a loss, he turned to his companion who was sprawled out on the floor.

"What do you reckon, boy?" Jon asked his wolf.

Naturally, he gave no sound in answer but just looked up at Jon briefly before resuming his lounging.

"That's helpful." He said with a small laugh.

His wolf usually laid at the bottom of his bed, but as of late he had to have Ghost sleep on the floor if he wanted a decent night's sleep. Ghost had grown larger than he expected and so quickly as well. He almost reached Jon's hip when stood erect, whereas the other wolves barely passed his knees. He had been meaning to ask maester Luwin as to why this is, but he doubted the maester would know, direwolves had been thought extinct this side of the Wall.

He had felt like a different man since naming his wolf. He could withstand lady Catelyn's glares - he had even given her a small smile once, to his own shock. This seemed to offend her, as she almost immediately left her viewing spot on the balcony above the courtyard. He couldn't explain how he knew it, but he knew it was because he had Ghost in his life. Or maybe it was because he knew he would be leaving Winterfell soon. Or maybe it was Tyrion's advice.

No, it was definitely having his snowy companion in his life. He enjoyed not feeling like everyone was looking down on him, wishing him out of their sight.

The evening meal proved eventful. Sansa had, somehow, learned that she very nearly could have been queen one day, and the resulting tantrum caused father to order everyone out of the hall. He wondered if anyone had told Sansa how lucky she was to have avoided having such a creature for a husband. She probably wouldn't believe it, she would see only the golden prince and the subjects she would one day order around. Arya had, of course, made the situation much worse by laughing harder than anyone else and mockingly referring to Sansa as 'Your Grace' for all to hear and see.

Jon came straight to his room after the show, and when the residual good humour had worn off, his mind once again turned to what his father had in store for him.

He would know soon enough, looking outside his window and seeing the darkest part of night would soon be upon it. He got up from his bed, and bent down to scratch Ghost's ears.
"You stay here, boy," Jon said. "I'll be back shortly, unless father means to tie me to the Heart Tree to keep me from the Watch."

Grinning at his wolf who seemed to roll his eyes at Jon's words, he stood and fastened on his cloak - the night made the already cold northern breeze feel as if an ice dragon was breathing on you.

Opening the door a sudden feeling of foreboding fell upon him, tinged with excitement. He didn't think anything of it as he exited and shut his door and began to make his way to the Godswood.
As the day of his departure loomed, Ned wished all the more he didn't have to leave his home.

The fortnight with his family was almost at an end. He wasn't sure Robert was going to grant his request when he made it, he was sore offended by Ned's refusal to betroth his son to Sansa. If it was anyone else who had refused him, the king would have demanded the betrothal happen regardless of the refusal.

Fortunately, because it was Ned, he didn't.

He'd suspected the king was intending to make such a proposal when he learned that the crown prince would also be visiting Winterfell. Knowing he was accompanying his father gave Ned time to calm his rage at the boy he had seen in his visions. That time didn't make the hatred that surged through him when he laid eyes on Robert's heir any less potent. His desire to run him through only grew each time he saw him strutting about Winterfell.

Even if the Gods hadn't shown him the kind of husband he would have been to Sansa, Ned would have rejected the proposal when he learned of the boy's nature.

His arrogance was typical of a Lannister, always boasting of skill and intellect that he so obviously lacked. The few times Ned saw him in the training yard made his weakness apparent, he'd cower when his partner would press forward and when he'd clumsily managed to check a blow, his whimpering could be heard across the yard as the impact of the clashing blades travelled through his scrawny arms.

One of the many hunts the king insisted on having revealed the boy's penchant for cruelty. Theon had managed to wound a deer, but it managed to limp out of sight before he could finish the kill. In typical fashion his ward had refused to chase after it, and so the prince volunteered and, after the disinterested grunt from his father, shot off after the creature with a speed that surprised Ned.

Eventually the king himself grew concerned and so Ned, Robb, Theon and Jory set off to find the prince. What they saw when they found him was sickening. Following the pitiful moans, they saw the heir to the Seven Kingdoms hunched over a defenceless, wounded animal and was skinning it alive. Ned was surprised the deer hadn't died of shock already.

When Robb, looking nauseous, stepped forward and ended the creature's suffering, Joffrey rounded on him and raged about it being his kill and that Robb had essentially stolen from his prince.

Ned would never allow his beautiful Sansa to marry such a creature. He thanked the Gods day and night for allowing him to save his innocent daughter from such a fate.

He had kept all of his children under strict supervision during the royal visit. After the letter Cat had received from her sister about the Lannisters potential involvement in Jon Arryn's death, and all he had seen his family suffer, Ned all but locked them in their rooms.

He'd ordered the guards to ensure at least two were always with each of the children, he vetoed Cat's orders and ensured their wolves were with them always - even in their bedchambers. He even ensured all food and drink they consumed was tested first.

The children had endured the new security measures, they were more than happy to have their wolves to snuggle with at night. Arya, of course, had protested first. He forbade her entering the
training yard whilst the royals were at Winterfell and she raged at him in his solar, until he reminded her of their deal regarding her combat training.

He had to be uncharacteristically stern with Bran, who was usually an obedient child, when it came to his climbing. Bran was furious that his father would humiliate him by ordering he be carried to his room, if he even looked like he made to run from his guards.

As much as Ned disliked restricting his children so, he would endure much worse to prevent any harm from coming to them. He didn't trust the crown prince or any of his lackeys to go easy on Arya, who would without a doubt challenge them to spar if she was with them in the training yard.

He also wouldn't put it past a Lannister to throw Bran off of whatever he was climbing if they were given the chance.

It brought Ned no small relief when the king and his entourage departed. Finally, his family was safe in their home where they belonged, with no lions to threaten the pack. Ned would have to leave them here when he goes to the capital, but he would see them again soon enough, he knew.

Now all that was left to do was arrange his departure, and then it was time for the truth to finally be told.

* *

All of the arrangements were finalised. Ned would depart for King's Landing in three days. He would be taking his steward, Vayon Poole, Jory Cassel and fifty of his guardsmen. He had ensured all those accompanying him were made aware that none of their wives or children were to join them. Vayon's daughter was disappointed upon hearing this, and she wasn't the only child to feel that way.

Sansa and Bran had been pestering him to change his mind ever since he told them they'd be staying at Winterfell. Ned knew how much they wanted to see the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, especially the capital, but the danger was not to be taken lightly - even though Ned was the only one aware of it at that moment.

Evening meal was a small feast that night. In honour of the men who would be accompanying Ned as he served as Hand. He had relieved all those who would journey with him of their duties for the rest of their time at Winterfell; so that they were free to get as drunk as they would like tonight, spend the next day regretting it and then have the final day with their families.

It was important to show his men that he appreciated their service to him, and that he would always have their best interests at heart.

"It isn't just to inspire loyalty, though," He said to his eldest son who was sat next to him. "A lord is responsible for the welfare of his people. This goes beyond safety and ensuring they have full bellies, he must strive to ensure they're content and to know that they have an impartial ear to voice their concerns and complaints to."

Robb was silent as he mulled these words over. He would be acting lord of Winterfell during his father's absence, and it was clear to everyone that he was doubting his ability to lead.

"You'll have counsel here, maester Luwin and your mother will ease the burden as best they can, but," Ned couldn't help but chuckle as he continued. "Even when others are aiding you, you must always give it your all. No matter how much of the weight of leading they help you lift, always strive to ensure none are lifting more than you."
"I'm scared, father," Robb finally admitted sheepishly. "I always knew it would fall to me one day, but not this soon. What if I fail? What if you return home and find nothing but chaos?"

'How I wish it were otherwise, son,' Ned thought to himself. 'There will be chaos before long and naught that you do here can stop it.'

"Trust in your instincts, Robb. If you're ever in doubt, seek counsel and don't feel too proud to do so. There is nothing more dangerous to a lord and those who depend on him than stubborn pride."

He placed a hand on his son's shoulder, giving it a squeeze as he continued his unplanned speech.

"I was not born to be the lord of Winterfell, but you were. You're my firstborn and eldest son. My heir. I'm not sorry the responsibility is to fall on you so young, and neither should you be." He smiled at the abashed look that appeared on his son's face. "I felt the same when the responsibility fell to me, not just grief and anger for my slain kin, but also for the life I had wanted that was now lost to me. I knew I had to do my duty no matter my personal feelings. I said all of this to the father of my brother's betrothed - who was now my betrothed. What do you think he said to me?"

Robb was silent as he considered his answer.

"That as a man you must do your duty, and that mother would help you to do so?" He answered in a low voice.

"No." Ned replied simply. "He said to me: 'that you have chosen to live the life the Gods have chosen for you, rather than the one you wanted to choose for yourself, is proof enough that you're worthy of the task before you. That you saw no other choice but to do so, is proof enough that you're ready for it'. He believed I would do what was best for my people." He paused, realising the truth in his goodfather's words. "And he was right."

With a final squeeze of his son's shoulder, he turned in his seat to give Robb space to think over his words. Looking out at the people in the hall before him, Ned's heart felt full of pride and affection for everyone of them. His people. His friends. His family.

'These people are depending on me to ensure they survive what is to come,' He thought to himself. 'And they don't even know it. I cannot fail them. I will not fail them. I will not fail you, Lya. Not again.

* He had fought in two rebellions. He had faced off against three of the greatest knights in the history of the realm. He had done much in his life that required courage, but it took every ounce of it he had to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

He was trembling, dread rising as he got closer and closer to the Godswood.

Another reason he wanted to have the feast that night was because he wanted one more evening with his family, as they are now, before it all changes forever. Granted, Sansa's outburst had ended the night abruptly but still, he treasured the time with them nonetheless. He doesn't know how Jon is going to react, but he knows that they won't be able to just pretend as though nothing was said this night.

Not only is Jon about to learn that he has been lied to his entire life, he's about to learn he was born a king, and that he is meant to lead the world of the living against an enemy he'd only heard of in stories.
Ned couldn't imagine the burden he is about to place upon Jon's shoulders being his own to bear. He understood that his purpose was to prepare the living world to unite as one, but the act of uniting it, of leading it, was Jon's alone.

Shame crept upon him at how his honour and foolishness had almost cost the Old Gods their champion. He knew that, had they not intervened, he would have eventually sent Jon off to the Wall. Ned's shame deepened when he realised part of his reason for wanting to do so was to ensure he was not a threat to Robert's reign. Even at the Wall, Jon wouldn't be safe from Robert, which is one of the reasons Ned resolved to tell him the truth now.

He'd been selfish in more ways than one. Wanting to keep Jon close until he was ready for the Night's Watch. He convinced himself at the time that it was because only he could keep him safe, but again he was putting his own needs first and clinging to the last thing he had left of Lyanna. Were it not for his selfishness, Jon could be on his way to knighthood by now, or even a minor keep of his own.

Ned would make up for his mistakes and selfishness, whatever it took to atone and absolve himself. For his family and his Gods he would do it.

And here and now, at the entrance to the Godswood where his life had changed forever, as it was about to for his nephew, he would begin to make up for his failures.

As he reached the Heart Tree, he knew that there was no going back now. Steeling himself, he nodded at the other two who had already arrived, joining them in front of the Weirwood he was unable to speak from the nerves he was feeling.

Now, all he could do was wait.
After the journey to Winterfell, Tyrion never wanted to saddle his horse again.

But after hearing from the Night's Watchman who he learned was a Stark of how close the Wall was to Winterfell, he shocked himself with his spontaneous decision to accompany him back to it. It was another surprisingly long journey. One that he ended up having to take without the Watchman, due to Benjen being asked to stay behind for some family matter. Tyrion could have waited, but he wanted to get away from the tension he felt between the king and his new Hand. So, despite his curiosity as to what could cause said new Hand and his brother to linger, he set off for the Wall with his escorts, Morrec and Jyck.

"They're probably holding a family council to decide which man brooded best," He had quipped to his companions one night, attempting to lift their spirits. "Perhaps these are the tourneys they hold in the North?"

Clearly the Starks had little understanding of geography, as the Wall was not close by any definition Tyrion could think of. It seemed the North was a domain meant for giants, not men. From the land itself to the castles built upon it such as Winterfell, this place was truly a marvel he hadn't expected to enjoy so much - though the cold did mar his excitement somewhat. It was not the cold, however, that took his breath away as he and his escorts got closer to the Wall. No, it was seeing the Wall itself that did that.

The sheer size of it!

He was sure the Hightower in Oldtown was taller, it was hard to tell if he was seeing the top of the Wall or the blue-grey sky it blended in with as he looked up, what was clear was that nothing he had seen in his life matched the scale of the Wall.

He'd read of the Wall's size, and heard stories from people who claimed to have seen it themselves. He'd found the idea that it stretched 300 miles from east-to-west without even the slightest interruption to be fanciful, but as he turned his gaze east and then west, he could believe the tales of it.

The legends of its construction was also something he scoffed at without consideration, but that was before coming to the wintry abode that felt a world apart from the rest of the continent.

It was said that the Wall was brought in to the world from the mind of Brandon the Builder, with the hands of men being aided by magic, giants and the Children of the Forest. Tyrion would have liked to have met the man who led the creation of such a monument.

'If there was any place in this shit country where magic could thrive, much less exist,' He thought despite himself. 'It would be here, in this frozen, harsh, ancient land meant for more than just little men.'

Yet again Tyrion braced himself for another journey. It was time for him to leave the Wall, and he was eager to do so. The Wall itself may be a wonder, but the same could not be said for most of the men guarding it. Instead of paragons of honour and duty, the Wall was manned almost entirely by the refuse of the Seven Kingdoms.
Thieves, rapists, murderers, bastards and spare sons. If this lot were the second line of defence against what lurked beyond the Wall - they were already doomed.

Thoughts of the denizens of the lands beyond the Wall, lands he had seen and pissed on from atop it, brought his mind back to the meeting he had with the maester of Castle Black.

He had been surprised to receive such an invitation, he was sure the man wanted him gone after their first meeting; where he laughed off his and his lord commander's concerns.

"Ah, lord Tyrion," The maester greeted after his steward had let him in to his study. "Please, do sit down."

He did as the maester bid. He was unsure of what to think of the man. Despite his frailty and blindness, he gave off an air of serene power that felt vaguely familiar to Tyrion.

"I must apologise, maester Aemon," He said in an attempt to start the discussion on his own terms. "I hope my words earlier did not offend your lord commander and yourself."

The old man merely smiled, his unseeing eyes fixed on Tyrion's mismatched own. He was glad of the old man's inability to see the slight squirm Tyrion gave under his sightless gaze.

"The lord commander is a proud man, from a proud northern house. But he is not an unreasonable man. He understands that words alone cannot convince a mind to accept knowledge it could scarcely handle. Knowledge such as the threats beyond the Wall." He finally said.

Tyrion baulked at that. Was the man calling him a simple-minded fool for not believing foolish tales?

Usually he would respond with a quip of his own, but he wasn't used to dealing with such a man - besides his lord father. Unlike Tywin Lannister, however, maester Aemon didn't have to give cold glares and veiled threats to keep him silent. This made the old man seem all the more impressive to him.

"I don't doubt that there are dangers beyond the Wall, good maester," He ventured in an attempt to avoid further offending the man. "Even in the south, reports of wildlings and the savagery of their raids cause-"

"You came here from Winterfell, my lord, did you not?" The maester cut him off.

"I did," He answered slowly, confused at the turn of the conversation.

"If say, a thousand men attempted to breach its walls and sack the castle. Would they be successful? Would they even be able to get close enough before the lord sent out a force to meet them?"

Tyrion was about to reply that no place was completely unassailable, but then he recalled the grim fortress and he reconsidered. Anyone versed in the art of strategy would consider assaulting the walls of such a place only as a last resort.

"Not without trickery, or an inside man." He answered at last.

The maester nodded slowly, once more with that knowing smile.

"When men want to keep other men out, they build forts and castles," He paused to clear his throat. "What kind of men could warrant the construction and eternal vigilance of a barrier such as the
Wall? Would the castles built along it and regular patrols not suffice? If they're strategically placed and the forces guarding them properly organised, what need is there of the Wall?"

Once again Tyrion found himself unable to respond with his usual wit. But the maester wasn't finished.

"Wildlings make it past the Wall from time to time. The bravest of them climb it, yes it is possible," He paused once more smiling at the look of disbelief he could not see on Tyrion's face. "The Wall was not built to protect the yet to be Seven Kingdoms against the savagery of the yet to be wildlings. It was built to defend against a force much more sinister." He shifted in his seat, his eyes fastened upon the man before him. "The Wall has carried out its purpose for thousands of years. It never forgot what its purpose was, unlike the men who guard it. Ice melts and memory fades. Everything has its own imperfections, yes, but the balance of all things soften the ravages of time. Yet that balance is tipping ever closer to the side of chaos, I fear."

He sat back in his chair and looked expectantly at Tyrion.

He has never felt so conflicted. He who prides himself upon his intellect and ingenuity, was faltering before a man who was speaking of myths as though they were facts.

Honesty was the best way to bring this conversation back to familiar waters.

"Maester, I have no idea how to respond to what you have said." He spoke carefully. "You're talking of things that I have only ever known as the imaginings of-"

Once more the maester interrupted him, this time with urgency.

"Can you imagine dying? We're all familiar with it yet none who know it can impart their wisdom. I will not pretend that I fully understand the threat, but simple reason and imagination lead me to believe it's genuine. You would not build a castle to guard against men if you had never seen another soul in your life before."

He rose unsteadily from his seat, indicating the audience was over.

"As the Starks whose hospitality you've just recently enjoyed say 'Winter is Coming,' make no mistake, my lord," He looked down at Tyrion and that serene sense of power was flooding the room. "It will come. Even if a whole country of men and women doubt it's existence, it will not stop the snows from falling when winter reaches them."

He offered Tyrion a hand, shaking it in farewell. Tyrion was glad to leave the room but the maester's voice stopped him at the door.

"Nor will doubt and mockery stop the forces beyond the Wall from falling on the realms of men."

Tyrion shuddered as his recollections came to end. He was loathe to admit it, even to himself, but as he looked at the Wall he couldn't help but agree with the maester.

'This was built to keep out something more than men, but whatever that was, it's long gone from this world." He thought with a confidence he didn't entirely feel as he set out once more for Winterfell.
JON III

Chapter Summary

The Reveal Part I
This was harder to write than I expected! I wanted it to be believable for both sides: that Jon was learning his entire life has been a lie, and that Ned was coming clean about the lie.
In the end I decided to split it in to two chapters to keep the story on track as I wish it to be!
Ned's fallout from this revelation will be portrayed in his own chapters to come, this is all about Jon for now!

Hope this doesn't disappoint!

Trigger warning for anxiety/panic attacks. It was hard to describe them as I experience them, I hope it doesn't trigger any sufferers but I've put this here just in case. Mental health matters!

Jon's excitement was ebbing whilst that sense of foreboding was growing as he got closer to the Godswood.

He couldn't explain why he was so anxious. It was his father he was meeting in his favourite place in Winterfell. There was no reason for him to be feeling this way.

His father had refused to answer Jon when he asked why they were to meet, and he had asked many times in the few hours since he was bid to come to the Godswood. A part of him reasoned that this was to be a test of some kind; to test his resolve or understanding of what joining the Night's Watch truly meant.

This seemed even more likely when he reached the entrance to the Godswood and found someone there waiting for him.

"Uncle Benjen? What are you doing here?"

His uncle was already a brother of the Night's Watch. The Wall has been his home for years. Of course he would be here for this, to give a first-hand account of life at the Wall.

"Jon," His uncle greeted, his expression sombre. "Your father asked for me to be here, myself and another man. I don't know who he is, Jon," He quickly said as his nephew opened his mouth to speak. "But when your father told us why he wanted us to gather tonight, I came here to wait for you."

None of this was making any sense. He could understand why his uncle would be here, for he was a Watchman already. But who was this other man? Benjen would have known him if he'd been a brother of the Watch.

"Is this about the Night's Watch? About me joining?" He asked in an attempt to make sense of the situation.
But when his uncle shook his head and replied, Jon's breath caught and his stomach lurched with a mixture of excitement, fear and impatience.

"It's about your mother, Jon," He said slowly. "That's why he wanted us here, tonight. I told him you shouldn't have an audience and he said you'd need more support than he could give, but that it was your choice. The other man left before I did. I waited here for you to see what you would want to do, Jon."

His mother? He was finally about to learn of his mother? The faceless ghost who had haunted him all his days?

Was the other man his mother's kin?

'Could she be here as well?' He couldn't help but feel hopeful at the thought, unlikely as it seemed. 'Am I to meet her?'

His musing was interrupted by his uncle placing a hand upon his shoulder.

"If you want me to be there, then I'll be right behind you," He said reassuringly. "But if you don't, then I'll wait here and make sure you're undisturbed. The choice is yours, Jon."

Jon's mind was spinning and his body trembling. The knowledge he had yearned for was waiting for him in the Godswood. But why now? Why here?

Those questions could wait. What matters is that he was about to learn of his mother. He would likely learn the answers to them from his father this night anyway.

He looked at his uncle, a man he loved as much he did his father and siblings. He'd always made Jon feel like a true part of the family, he could forget he was a bastard in those moments he, his uncle and Arya would play jokes on the rest of Winterfell.

He owed many of his happy memories to his uncle, but learning of his mother was not one he wanted to share. He had to share it with his father, as he was the one who had to tell Jon. But his uncle was giving him the choice his father apparently thought not to.

He waited here for Jon to make the decision. He likely glared at the stranger pointedly until he got the message and left the Godswood. Jon felt his love and respect for his uncle increase.

"I'm grateful to call you my uncle," Jon said as he placed a hand over the one his uncle had on his shoulder. "But I would do this on my own. I would have it between my father and I."

Understanding crossed his face as he squeezed Jon's shoulder and nodded.

"I would feel the same if it were me," He said proudly as he released his nephew's shoulder and stood back. "As I said, I'll wait right here for you and make sure no one enters."

"Thank you, uncle Benjen."

"Go on, lad," He encouraged with a smile. "You've waited long enough."

Giving his uncle a smile of his own, Jon nodded once at him and turned to enter the Godswood. His mind racing as fast as his thundering heart as he walked the familiar path.

It felt as if an eternity had passed before he finally reached the Heart Tree.
His father was there waiting for him, as his uncle had been at the entrance. He was facing the weirwood with his head bowed, but he began to turn as soon as Jon entered the clearing.

Seeing his father caused the reality of the situation to wash over him.

His mother would no longer be a complete stranger to him after this night.

The last time he stood before this tree, he had walked away having given a name to his wolf. This time he would walk away able to give a name to his oldest ghost, at long last.

His father gave him a small smile as he faced Jon, a smile that did nothing to hide the fear and shame painted across his face.

His expression sent dread coursing through Jon. That sense of foreboding was back in force, threatening to engulf him. Before he could stop himself, he asked the question he feared the answer to most.

"Is she alive?"

Tears started to fall from his father's eyes as did the smile on his face, and Jon knew he had his answer. The small shake of his father's head drove the hard truth deep in to his now broken heart.

His worst fear had been realised.

He would never know his mother.

Tears of his own began to fall in earnest, obscuring his vision as he was swept away by the tide of realisation. Tears that would never be wiped away by a mother's hand.

He would never know what it's like to be loved, not the way Robb, Arya and the rest have always been by their mother.

All the unmade memories would forever remain that way. There was no hope of them becoming more than the imaginings of a little boy pining for his mother. The faceless spectre would remain so.

He latched on to the anger that he started to feel, and pulled at it desperately so he could leave this prison of misery and despair he was trapped in. Anger at only just now learning this truth. Anger at the man who stood before him and allowed him to hope for a woman he knew would never come.

"Why-" Jon began his voice barely cooperating. "Why tell me this now? Why not before-" A sudden thought struck him. "Was it recent? Is this why you're telling me now?" The hope he didn't want to feel took hold of him as yet another thought occurred to him. "Is this why you didn't want me to leave? Was she coming for me?"

He wasn't a man in that moment asking these questions, he was that same little boy who cried himself to sleep at night. The little boy he never really had a chance to be.

The look on his father's face was one of pain. The pain for which there is no relief. The pain of loss.

The effort it cost him to look at his son was obvious as he finally spoke.

"I'm sorry, Jon. Your mother died just after birthing you," His voice was raw with emotion. "She had just handed you to me, and then she passed on."
Hatred joined the onslaught of emotion ripping his soul apart upon hearing these words, but it was mostly directed inwards, not at his father.

'I killed my mother,' He lamented in his chaotic mind. 'My first act in this world was to end the life of the woman who had given me my own.'

He wanted to flee from this place, from the anguish and guilt that was eating away at him. Even as a part of him reasoned that he was a helpless babe - he wanted to be anyone else but Jon Snow.

Unable to handle the conflict raging within him, he instead allowed his anger to focus on his father. The man who had kept this from him since the day he was born.

"Why not tell me sooner?" He demanded, his voice shaking with barely contained fury. "Why allow me to hope for a mother you knew all this time would never come?"

All those times he had longed for her came flooding in. When he saw Robb smiling on his mother's lap as Catelyn smiled lovingly back at him; when he lay abed ill wishing she would come and make it better; when he joined Robb and Sansa in their father's chambers for a story, only to be ordered out by lady Catelyn. He had never wanted his mother more than when he was running back to his lonely bedchamber, his tears hitting the floor as loudly as his little feet.

"I told you that there were things we must speak of," His father's voice broke him out of the torturous grip of his memories. "Things you need to know before you decide what to-"

"What does any of this have to with my mother? She's gone and-" His voice failed him, saying the words hurt too much. It was too soon.

"It has everything to do with your mother, Jon," His father answered. He took a deep, steadying breath and turned to glance briefly at the weirwood before looking at his son. "And it has everything to do with your father."

Confusion replaced anger and hurt as the dominant force barreling through him at these words. He couldn't make sense of any of this. What was his father saying?

Looking at him, he could see fear and shame once more upon his features, but there was also that resolved expression; the one he wore when duty bade him to exact justice.

"I don't understand, father," He said to him, for he is his father. "What are you saying?"

Once again his father, he is his father, took a deep breath before answering with the voice he used when passing a sentence.

"You're my blood, Jon. I've always said it, and I meant it. But you are not my son."

Jon stumbled back as if the words had hit his body as hard as they did his soul. He had never, not even in his darkest night terrors believed that his father would reject him. His father who had shamed himself by openly claiming Jon as his bastard.

He had just learned his mother was dead, and now his father was rejecting him.

'He must blame me for killing her,' He realised. 'But I didn't. I was a babe. I wouldn't.'

"Why?" He cried. "It wasn't my fault she-"

His father closed the distance between them and grabbed Jon by both of his shoulders, his face was
riddled with emotion as he looked into his son's eyes. If hatred was one of them then Jon couldn't
tell.

"It wasn't your fault your mother passed, Jon, the birth was-" He grimaced at the memory. "There
was no maester there, it was a ruin." His voice took on a stronger tone despite the tears streaming
down his face. "She loved you, Jon, what little strength she had left she used to hold you. Just once.
She knew she wasn't going to live."

"Who was she? Did you love her?" He had to know, little difference it made now.

"I did, I always loved her. She was always my favourite," He had to stop to clear his throat, putting
a hand on the back of Jon's head, he briefly rested his forehead against Jon's before pulling back to
look in his eyes. "Lyanna. My sister. She was your mother, Jon."

Everything stopped. Even his breathing and that of his father. His eyes were locked on to Jon's and
he could see the guilt in them.

He couldn't be a bastard born of incest. It wasn't the Stark way. That means the man before him
wasn't his father - not if he was telling the truth of his mother.

And Jon could tell, from the look in his eyes, that it was the truth.

"You're not-" He couldn't finish the question. He didn't want it to be real.

His father shook his head anyway, and Jon could feel his world crumble around him. His life was a
lie, from his birth to this moment here that could well be his death.

"Who-" He was struck dumb as he put the pieces together.

Lyanna was betrothed to Robert Baratheon, but there was no way the Starks would allow him to
lay with her before they were wed. His love for her was no secret. The only other man he knew had
an interest in her was the man who kidnapped her and raped her. The man who killed her.

"No, no no no-"

He was shaking his head vigorously, hoping that it would deflect the words he knew his father
would soon speak. It did little good for as soon as they reached his ears, he felt the last piece of him
die. The only certainty he had ever had was a lie.

"Your father, your true father, was Rhaegar Targaryen."

Jon broke out of his father's embrace, he has to be his father and made to leave but he couldn't take
another step.

He couldn't breathe, his lungs refused to fill with air. The world was spinning and his stomach was
churning. He couldn't form a word to ask for help, he was trapped in his own body as his mind
relished all the pain and fear he'd ever known. He was shivering despite the thick cloak and burning
brazier next to him. His heart was hammering against his chest so violently his vision was pulsing
and darkening, and filling his ears with a rushing sound that further disoriented him. He could feel
each pulse of his heart throughout his body. He knew this was the end for him.

The last thing he remembered as the ground rose up to meet him was seeing the face on the
weirwood, and feeling his father's arms catch him as the last of the light faded.

'My father,' He thought as the darkness closed in on him completely. 'Mother.'
He was only aware of being aware that there was nothing.

He remembered falling to the ground, in great pain and total confusion. Certain that his body was dying, unable to handle the trauma his mind was suffering. He couldn't feel the damp earth on his face though, he couldn't even see the earth his head must be resting on.

There was nothing. Just this all-encompassing darkness, he was aware of the fear that should be causing his heart to beat faster, but he couldn't feel a thing. Not from inside his body or outside in this blackness.

He didn't want to be here. He wanted to wake up in his bed. He wanted all of this night to have been a terrible dream. He wanted to wake up and be the son of Eddard Stark. He didn't want to be the son of anyone else.

You've wished all your life to know your mother and the truth, yet now you know of her and what that truth is, you wish for it all to be lies?

He was both relieved and terrified as he heard the voice, or rather felt it as though it were his own.

'Who are you?' He thought, but he felt it ripple out in to the darkness as though he had breathed the words out. 'Where am I?'

The damage Eddard Stark caused was greater than we expected. You were overwhelmed and so we took the opportunity to bring you here, that you might recover enough to understand. As to who we are and where you are. Well, you're still under our gaze in the place you call the Godswood.

If he had a heart it would have stopped as he realised who he must be speaking with. What he must be speaking with.

'The Gods?' He exclaimed in awe. 'You're the Gods?'

This is what men have come to know us as, yes, but what we are doesn't matter. Who you are does.

None of this was making any sense. He was speaking with the Gods, but they were speaking in riddles. And this darkness was getting to be too much. He needed to escape it. He needed light. A fire.

Just as he thought of the fireplace in his bedchamber, flames erupted in front of him, at least he assumed it was in front of him. Space and direction were hard to make sense of.
The fire was not the normal kind. Instead of orange-red, it was pure white, and it gave off no heat. It didn't illuminate anything around it either, and it seemed to feed off the darkness to sustain itself.

*Impressive. Perhaps the damage is not so great that it cannot be undone.*

'Did I do this?' He asked bewildered.

*Yes, you did. It is not yet time for you to understand how, but it is encouraging that you can. This is not why we brought you here. The truths we charged Eddard Stark with telling you will be easier to accept, and understand, if you see them for yourself.*

'Them? My parents? Is my mother here?' He dared to hope yet again, despite how many times he'd been rewarded with pain that day.

*No, child. She is not. Only the memories she left upon the world.*

'But you can bring her here, you're the Gods!'

*Of this world, yes. Your mother has moved on to one we have no power over, one that is a mystery even to us. If we could bring her here, we would not. She lived and she died. There would be no kindness in such an act.*

'Then what am I to see for myself?'

*We will show you what came before. As we did Eddard Stark. Once written, all stories can be read again by men such as yourself. Your mother's story is no exception. Time does not permit we show you all. The longer you are here the more dangerous it becomes. Ready yourself.*

Before he could even ask what to ready himself for, the nothingness and white fire were gone. Suddenly he found himself back in the world. In a place he had never been before.

He was standing next to a woman on the bank of a lake. She was looking across at an island a short distance away, as if contemplating swimming to it. He knew as soon as he saw her who she was. His mother. She was beautiful. She looked of an age with him. The colour of her hair, the long face and the grey eyes were the same as Jon's. She really was his mother.

'M-mother?' He said to her.

She did not respond, she didn't even react.

He was viewing the past, he realised. She was gone from this world and this was only a memory. He couldn't feel too sad about this, he was still looking upon his mother!

"You haven't thrown Arthur in have you, my love?" A voice laughed behind them.

His mother smiled when she turned and saw who spoke. He wanted to savour this image forever.

The man approaching them was also beautiful. He was tall, with dark purple eyes and silver-gold hair he wore long. He looked the very image of a prince. His nose, lips, cheekbones and build were almost the exact same as Jon's. This was his father. Rhaegar Targaryen.

*My love? Is that what you call your captives?*

He didn't make out the words they were speaking as the scene was shifting, just as his mother reached up to kiss his father.
They were at the side of a road making camp for the night. His mother was laying across his father's legs as he was talking with one of the knights accompanying them, his father running absentmindedly through her hair. She looked happy. Not at all like a captive would, even with the two armed knights around them she looked at ease as she closer her eyes.

"Promise me, Ned."

The scene had changed again and what he saw broke him all over again. His mother was laying in a bed drenched in blood. A younger version of Eddard Stark was kneeling at the side of the bed, one hand clasped in hers and the other holding a babe. He promised his mother, his face a picture of agony. And this she let out a final breath like a sigh and was still. She did not move again.

'No, I don't want to see this,' He despaired. 'I want to see her happy, I want to see her living.'

He thought back to her smile and wished he could see that again.

The scene quickly returned back to that moment, he was looking at his mother smiling as she turned to face his father. The scene froze with her smile upon her face and Jon was content to remain here forever.

After what felt like an age, something started to go wrong. He could feel the strangest sensation crawl over him, like tiny spiders were crawling on his skin. Just as he began to wonder what this might be, he was pulled back in to the nothingness, but it was not the same darkness he was first in.

There were other people here as well, though they took as much notice of him as did the memories of his parents. These people were not whole, they were milling aimlessly about for as far as he could see. They looked to be made of smoke.

He spotted a figure amongst the ghosts that would have caused him to soil himself if he were actually here. It was a monster.

As beautiful as his father had been, and tall as well, but it felt wrong. The frozen horns on its head resembled a crown and those blue eyes are unnerving. It began to walk towards him, no expression just a determined gait in his direction.

He knew this creature meant him ill and that he shouldn't let it near him but he had no weapon. And he could see none.

'The fire,' He remembered.

Picturing the fireplace he had sat before so many times, the white flames again burst in to being but instead of burning as before they exploded and shattered the scene before him. Again he was in the darkness he first found himself in.

_We warned you not to linger. Now, you will have to leave before this is made worse._

'What was that thing?' He was still shook up from seeing it.

_The reason you are learning all that you are. The reason we have decided to step in. That you were able to cast it out bodes well for the night to come, but it has not yet fully awakened so it was not at full power. Just as you are not._

'I do not understand. How did I do that?'

_You will. When it is time. First you have to accept the truths Eddard Stark has revealed to you. He_
told you as we bid him, for if you remained in ignorance the world would have suffered. Acceptance is the first step on the path to understanding and it is vital that you understand. Now, you must go before the enemy finds you again.

Slowly, the blackness began to change to light until it was too bright to behold. And then he was back in the Godswood.

The faces of his father and uncle were coming into focus as his vision cleared, both sets of Stark eyes gazing at him in concern.

He could feel his back pressed up against a hard, warm surface that was matching his heartbeat with pulses of its own. The Heart Tree, he knew.

How did he get here? He was standing at least ten feet away when he fell.

Jon felt feverish and fatigued; his muscles ached and his stomach still churning slightly. He thought the worst of it was the dry and bitter taste of his mouth, until he became aware of the wetness at the front of his breeches. He must have lost control of his bladder when whatever seized him caused his body to fail.

Conscious of his father and uncle seeing him in such a state, shame started to creep in before he remembered why he why in it in the first place.

He started to rise to his feet, feeling weak and unsteady he likely would have fallen again, were it not for his father and uncle supporting him.

'Not my father,' He reminded himself. It felt wrong in every single way but he knew it was true.

Feeling stable enough with some of his weight on his uncle Benjen, Jon shrugged off his other uncle and looked him in the eye.

Pain, shame, anger, resentment, fear; Jon wasn't sure what he felt most but he knew he wanted answers. All of them. The answers the Gods themselves had charged Ned with telling him.

"You should-" He paused to gather himself. He was still shivering enough to make speaking difficult. "You should have told me sooner." He looked at Benjen, hoping that he was also unaware of the truth. "Did you know? Did you know who she was?"

"No, Jon. I still don't," He looked to his brother. "I barely heard Ned shout your name, so I came here and found you on the floor. You weren't moving and your eyes-" He broke off with an audible swallow. "Your father said to rest you against the tree and that seemed to help. You came to soon after."

Relief flooded through Jon but his anger still surged at hearing it. He had been kept in the dark as well. Why?

He looked at the man he had always known as his father.

"Is there more?" He asked shortly. He wanted to leave this place, clean himself up and then allow his soul to come to terms with his new reality. "Tell it all, please."

He glanced at uncle Benjen and then Jon, already breathless with having to face his lies.
''Your father didn't abduct-'' He began.

''I know, they loved one another.'' Jon interrupted. He hated how a part of him broke hearing his father - **uncle** - refer to someone else as such.

He realised as he soon as he saw the memories the Gods had shown him that Lyanna Stark was no captive. She clearly wanted to be there, with Rhaegar. His father.

She loved him, and he loved her.

It was the only revelation that didn't tear his soul apart. He wasn't the son of Eddard Stark, but he was as much of a Stark as he'd always been. He may still have a bastard's name but he was born of love, not because his father sought to sate his base needs as he was at war.

''I don't understand,'' Benjen said.

''How do you know?'' Eddard gasped.

His uncle Benjen's face was filled with confusion as he looked between his brother and nephew. He had as much right to know as Jon did, but he didn't want to go over it all. At least not until he had come to terms with himself. Maybe not even then.

''I can't explain it all, but-'' He gently eased himself off his uncle's supporting arm and looked at Eddard. ''He's not my father,'' His voice caught at the final word. ''Please, I'll tell you when I can, I just want to know the rest and then leave.''

His uncle Benjen looked as though he wanted to protest, but seeing how worn his nephew looked he merely nodded.

''All right, Jon,'' He replied, his face filling with understanding. He looked to his brother, the anger obvious in his voice as he addressed him. ''Go on, Ned.''

Eddard hung his head, a lone tear falling from his eye.

''I don't know how you knew-'' He began but Jon cut him off.

''The same way you knew now was the time to-'' He broke off as a blazing question suddenly burst into his mind. ''Were you ever going to tell me? Of your own choosing?''

It was clear from the way his head bowed in defeat that this was the last question he wanted Jon to ask. He was silent until Jon couldn't take it anymore.

''Tell me!'' Jon all but roared.

''Ned-'' Benjen began sounding impatient.

''I don't know,'' Eddard finally spoke. ''I promised your mother I'd protect you. That's why I brought you here as my bastard. If Robert knew he would have killed you. He would have killed all of us if he found out.'' His face showed nothing but pain as he spoke.

Benjen looked once more as if he was going to interrupt, but Jon stayed him with a hand. He wanted this to be over, he couldn't take much more.

''It shames me to admit that as you grew, it became more about Robert. I didn't want to threaten his reign, but not just because the realm needed peace after the war. He was my friend,'' He closed his
eyes to try and trap the tears that came anyway. "I wanted to keep us safe, to keep you safe as I promised, but I didn't think of the damage I was doing to you." He couldn't even look at Jon or Benjen. "I kept my promise to your mother, but I didn't keep the one I made to myself."

"What promise? How could I have threatened his reign? A bastard has no right to inheritance." He said with bitterness and confusion in equal measure. His anger grew at hearing his father - uncle - had chosen his friend over his own blood. "As your wife never failed to remind me with Robb."

"What the fuck is going on here?" Benjen demanded, no longer content with being out of the loop. "If you're not his father then who is? Who is his mother? Jon?"

Jon was about to answer his uncle Benjen, but then Eddard spoke and Jon forgot how to speak.

"Lya." His voice hoarse with grief. "His mother was Lya, Benjen. And his father was Rhaegar Targaryen."

Benjen stepped away from Jon as though he were contagious, utter shock written all over his features. Jon didn't say anything as his world was once being torn apart with Eddard's words.

"There was no rape, Ben. She loved him." He looked at Jon. "She married him. You are no bastard, Jon."

He couldn't take anymore, the world was threatening to end again. He could already feel his body about to enter that same shock as before and he stumbled away, this time not allowing himself to fall even as his breathing became shallow and his vision began to darken.

His uncle Benjen caught him and helped him along, followed by Eddard.

"I can't-" He gasped. "No more,"

"It's all right, Jon," Benjen spoke in a voice thick with tears. "We'll get you cleaned up, that's it for tonight. Come on,"

They got to the entrance of the Godswood, and Benjen stopped to address his brother who had yet to say a word.

"I'll see Jon back to his chambers, and then I'll be along to yours," He spoke in a voice that offered no room for disagreement. "We have things to discuss, brother. Come on, Jon."

Jon let himself be led away, not even attempting to speak to Eddard who remained rooted at the entrance to the Godswood.

They had just barely made it to his door, when Jon's world yet again faded back to that empty darkness. His mind and body, spent as they were after the emotional trauma, welcomed it's embrace. He hoped he might once again see his mother's smiling face in the void.

Chapter End Notes

Jon might seem a little cool about everything after the visions, but he is NOT okay at all. I wanted to portray just how emotionally wrung out he is, but we will be exploring his recovery and eventual acceptance in his coming chapters!
Any feedback is welcome :) I was nervous writing this one
CATELYN II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her daughter could have been the queen.

It had been almost two weeks since Ned had refused the betrothal of Sansa and the crown prince. Catelyn had hoped for this ever since Ned informed her the king's heir would be a part of the royal visit.

When Ned told her that Robert had indeed proposed the betrothal, her heart leapt with joy - only to be shot down as he told her he intended to refuse it.

"I have my reasons," He had said after she failed, yet again, to convince him to change his mind. "Sansa will not wed that boy, not while I yet draw breath."

She had hoped the king would insist upon the betrothal, but she knew he would not because of the friendship he and Ned shared. Ned having already accepted the position of Hand of the King likely dulled the blow to Robert's pride. Her husband was to become the second most powerful man in Westeros.

'She could have been queen!' Cat once again raged in her mind. 'Our grandson would have ruled the Seven Kingdoms! What were you thinking, Ned⁈'

They knew their daughter would have to marry one day as was her duty. Who better than a prince? Now she'll have to settle for some gruff northern lord to maintain loyalties within the North, or some southern lord to secure alliances for House Stark.

Her daughter grew more beautiful by the day. That beauty would have flourished in the capital, but now it was doomed to wilt in a lesser hall.

This wasn't all that kept Cat's mind occupied as she waited in her husband's solar. What he was doing at this time she didn't know. Perhaps he was just making the most of the time he had left here. In just over two days time he would be departing for the capital. This worried her greatly. The idea of her honourable, forthright husband in the south where almost everyone was scheming did not sit well with her.

Ned governed the North with honesty and transparency, there were no underhanded tactics or clever word play in northern politics. He would struggle to adjust in the south, she knew.

Yet this was not the only reason for her worry of Ned in the south.

She worried he would return with another woman's son. Another bastard.

Her husband had refused to take any of their children with him, no matter how much Sansa and Bran pleaded, he was adamant he would take only his steward and guards.

They had been strangers when he first rode off to war and returned with his bastard son. A part of her could understand her husband seeking comfort in another woman, at a time when any night could have been their last, she assumed most lords would. She knew, even then, that Ned would acknowledge any bastard he sired and would see it provided for. It was the fact that he raised him alongside their children that she hated!
Would history repeat itself? Or would five beautiful children and almost twenty years of marriage prevent her husband from sating his baser urges?

Thoughts of the boy brought him to the front of her mind.

He had been different of late. Usually he would leave any place she was, and avoided interacting with her besides the courtesy owed to her and her station. Lately, however, the boy would remain where he was no matter how hard she looked at him - he even smiled at her once! It irked her that this bastard was walking around Winterfell with his head held high and accompanied by his wolf, talking with her son - the true heir - as though they were equals!

The wolf was another source of irritation.

Cat had no love for the beasts her children had adopted, in truth she feared them, though they seemed to obey each of her children. It was not enough that the bastard also gets a direwolf like her true Stark children, but his happened to be the most beautiful, even she could admit it, and as of now the largest of the litter. It was as if the Gods were intent on reminding her that only Arya looked like a Stark. Her youngest daughter who resembled her bastard brother more than her trueborn brothers.

The discussion of what was to be done with the bastard was one of the reasons they were to meet tonight.

She had refrained from bringing it up during the royal visit, but Ned had promised they would speak of it once the king had left.

Catelyn did not understand why Ned would not send the boy to the Night's Watch. Not only would he be with his uncle at the Wall, but the boy himself wanted to take the Black!

A part of her had always kept her from outright demanding that Ned sends the boy away. She remembered when he was ill as a child and like to die, she sat by his bedside and prayed for his recovery and tended to him as she did Robb when he was ill. Ever since that day she could not bare the thought of that same child alone in the world, but the Mother did not soften her heart enough for her to love him. She hadn't really tried, in all honesty. Still, whenever she suffers night terrors of her children meeting with some horrible fate, as all mothers must surely do, she is always surprised that Jon is present in them. His little body broken by the pox that almost ended his life. She had never told that to anyone, not even Ned when he would comfort her after she had woke up terrified from such dreams.

Sometimes she wondered if it was just her pride that prevented her from loving the boy. She didn't spend much time thinking like that, though.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard her husband's voice outside the door. He was dismissing the guards stationed there.

A sense of excitement and impatience rose within her as Ned entered, but it quickly changed to concern as she noticed the pain on his face.

"Ned," She said as she stood and approached her husband.

"What happened?" She took his head in her hands in an attempt to have him look at her. "Speak to me, husband. What ails you? Where were you?"

He said nothing, only sighing as he walked to his desk and poured a glass of wine, which he quickly drained. After setting the glass down he turned around to face her, leaning back on the
"I was with Jon in the Godswood," His voice was hoarse as if he'd been crying. "I-I failed him, Cat. I failed him."

She rushed forward as her husband's tears began to fall and placed her hands once more on each side of his head.

"No, Ned, you haven't failed him," It was hard to contain her anger at his belief he had failed a bastard he owed little to. "You raised him in your home with your trueborn children, you clothed him and made sure his belly was always full," It was hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice as she spoke. "He has been fortunate, Ned, not all bastards can say-"

"He is no bastard, Cat!"

Catelyn stepped away from her husband, his outburst and words shocking her greatly.

Surely he cannot mean it perhaps his protectiveness for his baseborn son had caused him to lash out in his current state.

The panic within her grew in to unbridled fear as she saw the passion in his eyes. Had he done it? Is that why he didn't depart with the king?

"You've-" She began as she fell back into her chair away from the desk. "You've had the king legitimise him, haven't you?"

Her mind was a sea of terror at what this could mean. She knew that Robb and the boy were of an age, but she did not truly know who was older. Was he conceived before or after they were wed? She'd never had any details or answers from her husband.

"Ned, what have-" She choked out.

"The king didn't need to, he has never been-" He was cut off as the door to the solar burst open.

Both she and Ned straightened as Benjen charged into the room.

"Jon, is he-" Ned began before Cat's scream drowned out his voice.

Without a word Benjen marched right up to his brother and drove his fist into his jaw. Ned stumbled against his desk and would have fallen if Benjen didn't have a firm grip on his collar.

"Benjen, stop!" Cat pleaded as he drew his first back to strike Ned again.

Throughout his brother's attack he made no move to defend himself. He merely stood there with an ashamed, defeated look on his face.

Benjen didn't stop. Once more striking his brother with his fist, following it by driving his forehead in to Ned's face.

Just as Cat was about to run for the guards Ned had dismissed; Benjen turned and threw his brother to the floor, knocking over a chair in front of Ned's desk as her husband landed with a resounding thud.

"You should have fucking told him sooner," Benjen spat at his brother. "You should have told me!"
"What is this?" Cat asked as she knelt beside her husband, placing a hand upon his shoulder. "Ned, shall I fetch the maester?"

Her husband shook his head with a groan. There would be bruises over his jaw and right eye where Benjen's fist had landed, and his nose was a bloody mess from his brother's assault.

Seeing her husband, the father of her children, in such a state caused her anger to flare as she once again addressed his assailant.

"Have you gone mad? By what right do you dare attack your brother?" She demanded.

Benjen merely looked at her as if seeing her for the first time, his usually reserved expression had been replaced with a combination of pain, anger and confusion. He looked as if he were burning on the inside.

"My brother?" He threw at Catelyn. "You don't know either, do you?"

"Know what? What is all this?" She asked once more, looking between her husband and goodbrother.

"The truth, Cat," Her husband's voice was distorted with pain. "I told Jon the truth." He propped himself up on to his elbow with a wince. He must have hurt his back when he landed.

"I don't understand, Ned," Cat's voice stumbled as she spoke, confusion making it difficult to form words.

"Good!" Benjen shouted, before lowering his voice. "At least you can plead ignorance for how you've treated him all these years. The same can't be said for your stag loving husband."

She was going to ask yet again for an explanation, but Benjen hadn't finished.

"Better make yourself comfortable, Cat," He said as he lowered himself into the other chair at her husband's desk. "Ned has a story to tell. The story of how he betrayed his family."

* It took a while for Ned to return to his feet and look at his brother and wife. Cat didn't think it was the pain that kept him on the floor, but the shame he was clearly feeling.

She couldn't imagine what happened, what betrayal Ned could have committed, that caused Benjen to attack his only remaining sibling.

As Ned lowered himself into the chair he knocked over - Benjen knocked over more like - she resumed her previous seat with a growing sense of unease.

"What is all of this about?" She wondered. "Why would a Stark accuse another of betraying the family they hold as sacred?"

Cat didn't need to ask this question out loud, as Ned started to speak.

"After the siege of Storm's End was broken, I journeyed on to Dorne. We found three members of the Kingsguard, protecting a dilapidated tower as though it were the Red Keep itself."

If she thought her confusion would lessen as her husband spoke, she was wrong. Still, she didn't interrupt. He would get to the point, eventually.
"We know, we've heard this before, Ned," Benjen had no problem with interrupting his brother. "The only survivors were you and Howland Reed, having somehow-" He stopped, realisation dawning on his face. "That's where you found her? And Reed, he knows as well, doesn't he?"

This time Cat couldn't hold her tongue.

"Found whom? What does Lord Reed know?" She couldn't remember ever being so confused.

It was Benjen who answered her.

"Jon's mother, she was-" He stopped himself again and turned to his brother, looking as though he were about to hit him again. "You should tell her. You've lied to her all these years, same as you have Jon and I."

Excitement and dread coursed through her in equal measure. She would finally learn of the woman.

'But what was she doing with the three greatest knights of the Kingsguard?' She mused.

Her husband looked at her with more shame on his face than she had ever known.

"Our sister, Lyanna," He sighed. "She was Jon's mother, Cat," His voice broke as he spoke the next words. "She died just after bringing Jon in to the world. It was I who named him, I don't know if she chose a name for him. I named him for the man who raised me as his son." His face fell even more as he continued. "As I promised to with Lyanna's son, but I failed him."

At this Benjen dropped his face in to his hands and started openly weeping.

Cat would have also wept with relief for herself, and sympathy for the boy, if it weren't for the burning question she had to ask her husband.

"If your sister-" She began.

"Rhaegar Targaryen," Benjen growled, he lifted his head from his hands and glared at his brother. "Was it true? Or were you just trying to stop Jon from hating himself more than he already does?"

Rhaegar Targaryen was Jon's father? The goodsister she had never met was his mother?

She was horrified. How could Ned have kept this from her? From their family? From the boy? The danger they would be in from the king if word got to him! His hatred for Targaryens was legendary.

She was about to demand answers when her husband began to speak once more.

"They met at the tourney of Harrenhal - before he crowned her," Ned started, with the air of beginning a long tale. "She was the Knight of the Laughing Tree, you know," He looked at his brother, suddenly smiling.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Benjen replied with a snort and a smile of his own, before schooling his features and gesturing to his brother. "Keep going."

Catelyn had heard of the Knight of the Laughing Tree. The thought of it being her goodsister was almost as strange as thought of her being Jon's mother.

"Rhaegar chased her down afterwards, on his father's orders," Ned continued. "Instead of taking her to him, he agreed not to tell anyone. Then he crowned her the Queen of Love and Beauty." He
took a deep breath. "We learned the rest from the letters we took from the tower."

"What letters?" Benjen asked. "Show them to me."

Catelyn wanted to see these letters herself, but her husband shook his head.

"They're with Howland at the Neck, all but one and that is for Jon, and Jon alone," He said firmly. "Elia Martell was unable to bear children after the birth of Aegon, she wouldn't have survived the birth of another. The letters we found confirmed this, written in her own hand, it seems."

He took a moment to gather himself.

Cat was unable to see how this could justify the kidnapping and rape of the daughter of a Great House, let alone one that was already betrothed to another Great House. But then, Ned wouldn't have raised the living proof of his sister's suffering in his home. She knew he would not see any harm to the child, he might even try to love him and would see him innocent of his father's crimes, but he wouldn't want him around to remind him of his sister's fate.

"I don't know how or when, but Lyanna and Rhaegar grew to love one another and so he annulled his marriage to Elia, with her consent and on the condition her children remain in the line of succession, ahead of any further sons." He looked at Benjen who was about to interrupt. "I'm getting there, brother." He sighed and resumed the tale. "A High Septon by the name of Maynard carried out the annulment and then married them in a ceremony at a Sept in the riverlands. They then married once more before the Old Gods on the Isle of Faces. The witnesses were the three members of the Kingsguard we found at the Tower. The marriage certificate and proof of annulment are with Lord Reed."

"But that would-" Catelyn began, absolutely stunned.

"Yes, with the deaths of the prince Aegon and princess Rhaenys, Jon is by rights the heir to the Iron Throne," Ned looked as if the next words left his mouth with great reluctance. "The sole reason no one disputed Robert's claim was because of his Targaryen ancestry. I was there. The only reason Tywin Lannister didn't call for a Great Council was because Jon Arryn was quick enough to point out his relation to the royal family. Otherwise, the Lannisters would have bought and threatened their way on to the throne."

This couldn't be real. She must be imagining all of this. The bastard boy she had watched grow up alongside her children, the same one she resented seeing and hearing, was the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms. How could Ned have kept this from her?

"You should have told me, Ned!" She couldn't help but pour all of the guilt and resentment she had felt in to the words. "I made the boy miserable because I thought he was YOUR bastard, and you just stood there and allowed it to happen? Why? He wouldn't have had to have grown up without a mother's love!"

She was shocked at the vehemence she spoke with. Especially as it was about Jon.

'My nephew,' She realised. 'Not the reminder if my husband's shame, at least not as his bastard.'

"Because he didn't want to threaten his precious Robert's playtime with the throne, that's why," Benjen answered, contempt clear in his voice. "You promised Lyanna you would keep him safe-"

"And I have!" Ned retorted. "He's alive, isn't he? What was I supposed to do put an infant on the throne? Robert would have killed him, Ben!" His face darkened. "Do you know what he did when the prince and princess were brought him? He laughed and said he saw no babes, only
dragonspawn."

Catelyn gasped and Benjen looked sick.

"How could you support the claim of such a man?" She asked her husband, feeling disgust for calling him such at that moment.

"How could you even call him a friend? Lyanna never wanted to marry him!" Benjen said. "But you and father pushed ahead with it anyway; you so you could finally call him brother and father so he could get himself a standing in the south! What kind of Stark betrays their family for gain? For anything?" He was growing more and more livid as he spoke.

Ned looked as though he wanted to argue, but then he just slumped forward in his chair and buried his face in his hands.

"You failed her, Ned." Benjen said. "You might have kept him safe, but you were going to let the last piece of her go and rot on the Wall with rapists and filth. All because you didn't want your true brother to lift his fat arse off of Jon's throne."

Catelyn wanted to tell Benjen he was being too harsh, but she could understand his rage. He was raised in Winterfell and would have known Lyanna more than Ned who was raised in the Eyrie. His words about the throne also shocked her but she didn't voice it. Instead she spoke to her husband to try and learn their next step.

"Where do we go from here, Ned?" She spoke soothingly. "He cannot go to the Wall. Benjen is right, your sister's son deserves more than that." It startled her how she was defending the boy she had resented all his life. Now that she was free of believing him to be proof of her husband's infidelity, she could only see the fragile boy she once cared for as he lay abed ill.

Ned looked up at her, his shame giving way to determination.

"There's already a plan in motion, though I can say nothing more than that. Not now-" He said before Benjen interrupted him.

"That man, the one who was there in Godswood, who was he?" He demanded.

"I cannot say, but he's not a threat to Jon. He's known about him for years." He replied.

Catelyn's world was in chaos. The rightful king had grown up under her nose, and she caused him to suffer. Her husband had lied to all of them and did so not just to protect his family, but to secure the reign of a king who did not deserve to rule.

Anyone who could laugh at the mutilated bodies of babes did not deserve to live, let alone rule.

"What does Jon mean to do?" She asked.

Ned looked thoughtful, and it was several minutes before he replied with absolute conviction.

"If he wishes to press his claim, he will have the support of the North. And he will have the support of others also," He looked at them as if deciding something. "I will delay my journey another week, there is more for us to discuss and it will not be as believable as what you have learned this night."

This ominous reply did nothing to allay Cat's anxiety and only added to her confusion. She could tell from the look on Benjen's face that he would also support his nephew should he press his
Cat didn't want there to be another war, but she had to make up for the damage she caused Jon. And she would start now.

"Where is Jon?" She asked.

"In his chambers," Benjen answered. "He wasn't in the best of states. I cleaned him up and then came here. I didn't know what to say," He sounded defeated.

She stood and made for the door, her resolve taking her by surprise.

"Where are you going?" Ned asked. "You can't speak of this to anyone, not even the children."

She looked back with her hand on the door handle and nodded.

"I'm going to do what you should have given me the chance to do," She couldn't keep the venom out of her voice. "And care for my nephew."

She left the room without a backwards glance. She hoped she would be given the chance to make things right.

She prayed to the Mother to soften her heart enough, not to love her husband's bastard, but to love a boy who never asked for this life but had been forced to suffer it anyway. And she felt her prayer answered instantly as she teared up with sympathy for the hidden king.

Chapter End Notes

Catelyn's sudden change of character will be made clear in her later chapters, so please hold off judgement until then lol as I hope I conveyed well enough she herself is shocked at how she feels now she knows Jon isn't the bastard son of her husband, but an innocent child who has suffered because of her pride. Again, it will all be made clear in the chapters to come!

Also, the throne thing might not be accurate in canon, but it's what I'm going with in this fic as a reason why there was no Great Council after the mad king was deposed. We'll be leaving the north for the next few chapters to get the lay of the land post royal visit :)

There'll be a delay in uploads over the weekend, family gatherings! Thanks for reading as always!

And yes, Jon is going to be called Jon Targaryen in this story. But he has yet to read his mother's letter!
Margaery was seated once more at the table in her grandmother's solar, the atmosphere was like that of a war council.

They were still unsure of how to proceed with the plan to present her to the King at the capital. They had received word that the King had departed Winterfell without Lord Stark. He accepted the position of Hand of the King, but grandmother's spies had informed them Lord Stark had rejected the betrothal the King had proposed.

Hearing this caused her father to practically leap with excitement, but grandmother looked only concerned. This is the reason they were all sat in her solar: to try and make sense of what they have learned and determine their next step.

"Right, well we know for certain that the Stark fellow has accepted the position of Hand," Her grandmother being the first to speak as always. "This isn't a surprise, even a northerner would be a fool to refuse such a powerful position. What isn't certain is why he refused a royal betrothal. What do we think?"

Margaery and Willas knew that this was a rhetorical question, but father apparently did not.

"I think it is likely that-" He began before being inevitably cut off by his mother.

"That whatever you say will do nothing to help us make sense of this? I agree, Mace." She said not even looking at her son. "It's good you pointed it out so soon, now we can focus on the task at hand."

Anyone who sat down with the Queen of Thorns enough knew that any silence she permitted was for her to think, not for anyone else to speak.

'I would have thought you had learned that by now, father,' Margaery thought to herself amused.

It had been a few weeks since they'd received word of a possible marriage alliance between the crown and House Stark. In that time, Margaery had thought often about what she would do if she was not to be queen. She knew she could keep up her charitable work here in the Reach, possibly expand it with the help of like-minded nobles in the other kingdoms. She wasn't disappointed at the idea of not marrying the crown prince; the reports she'd heard of him made it clear he would be a poor husband. Despite grandmother instructing her on how to deal with such a creature, she still felt nervous at the thought of being under his command as his wife.

She hopes if this Stark girl did end up marrying him, she would also know how to deal with the prince. She doubted it, though. House Tyrell had ensured Margaery received as intensive an education as her brothers did; while she may not be trained with arms and in combat, she knew how to use the weapons of womanhood to her advantage. Her grandmother had praised her time and again for her intelligence as well.

Yes, Margaery was more equipped that most noble ladies even without the wealth of Highgarden. Which is why it is so difficult to imagine herself as anything but the queen.

Willas cleared his throat in a pointed manner, an agreed method to ask for grandmother's permission to speak.

"Out with it," Olenna said nodding her head at her grandson.
"At the same time we heard the news of Lord Stark accepting his new position, and rejecting the betrothal," Willas began. "We also received news that the King left Winterfell without his new Hand, though we do not know why." He shuffled in his seat at a pointed look from grandmother, her way of telling him to get to the point. "I do not think we should make a decision about presenting Margaery to the King until we know for sure Lord Stark isn't going to reconsider the proposal."

"Why would the King agree to it after the betrothal has already been refused?" Margaery asked. "Surely his pride would prevent him from doing so? He surely didn't expect it to be refused in the first place. Especially from his brother in all but blood."

Her father looked like he wanted to say something, but wisely decided to hold his tongue as grandmother's face made it clear she was deep in thought. They all followed suit and waited for her to speak.

It was several minutes before she did so. Time enough for Margaery to yet again wonder what might become of her if she was not to be queen.

One prospect that excited her was who would be her husband if not the crown prince. She knew she would have her pick of noble lords; she was quite beautiful even if she were vain for acknowledging it. She also knew how to accentuate that beauty with both attire and words. Perhaps she would have an honourable, dutiful husband instead of the impulsive, cruel prince whose temperament was well-known. Her father would never allow her to marry anyone but the son of a Great House, she knew, but she can always dream a little.

Grandmother's authoritative voice broke through her girlish fantasies.

"You both make good points. It would be best to wait until the new Hand arrives at the capital. If he doesn't have his daughter with him then we know his mind remains unchanged," She adjusted herself in her seat before continuing. "However, it would be prudent to suggest a fast marriage when we present you to the King, my dear. Short of you being wedded and bedded, there is no guarantee that Robert wouldn't break off a betrothal with us should Stark change his mind."

So, more waiting. Margaery wasn't eager to marry the prince, but she didn't want to sit around and do nothing anymore. They had been ready to travel at a moment's notice ever since the King arrived at Winterfell.

"Could we not travel to King's Landing and meet the King there? Or-" She had sudden thought. "What if we arrange to meet the King on the road? Surely we can plan to meet him at a common stop on the way to the capital without arousing suspicion? That way we have an extra week or two of travelling to get ourselves established."

Willas looked at grandmother, father looked at the table in thought, but Olenna was looking directly at her.

"And how would you play this to our advantage, should we do as you suggest and happen to meet the King on the road?" She asked.

'She's testing me,' Margaery realised, trying not to let her sudden nervousness show.

She thought about all they had learned of the King and the prince. Grandmother had spies everywhere; not to the extent of the Master of Whisperers but enough to know of any developments.
"The King's appetite for wine is no secret, so taking the finest we have to offer is an obvious move," She began looking at her grandmother's expectant face. "Really, his indulgences are easy to exploit, we take as much fine food and wine as we can and ensure he always has an ample supply. As for the prince," She paused to quickly run through all they knew, devising a strategy most likely to succeed. "He likes to hunt and to show how superior he is, we've heard it from every spy you have that he enjoys little more than reminding everyone what a strong, gallant prince he is. I would ask to accompany him on a hunt if possible, where I shall play the part of a damsel in distress and await my prince to rescue me. I will have to ensure it isn't too arduous or he'll just order his guards to help instead."

Grandmother edged forward in her chair, her attention rapt.

"And what else can you do to ensure you have his full attention?" She asked knowingly.

"I will, of course, dress my best and always keep a smile on my face," She replied flashing one at Olenna. "Once I have him used to my company and caught on my, ahem, assets," She felt uncomfortable talking about this in front of her father and brother. "I will suggest a walk, just the two of us, and shall make sure I'm wearing my best dress for the occasion. That might be the best opportunity to entice him in to taking things a step further, respectfully, of course."

She couldn't help but feel uplifted seeing the pride in her grandmother's eyes, even as those of her father and brother were filled with discomfort.

"It will be a simple matter then of father pointing out how comfortable we are with one another, and then also mentioning the harvests the Reach has enjoyed these last few years. And the vineyards." She concluded.

Each of them had turned their attention to the Tyrell matriarch, awaiting her decision after Margaery's proposition.

"If only you'd had this idea sooner, my dear, and if only there were common stops we could have found a reason to be near," She began in a regretful tone. "If we were to depart this moment we might be able to meet them as they enter King's Landing," She furrowed her brow in thought. "We could have arranged to meet them nearby, but we have no plausible reason for being that far north. However, it might be best if we were to go to King's Landing to establish our presence there."

She looked at her son and grandson pointedly, before coming to a decision.

"We all know why Loras is in King's Landing, but we should send a raven to him and provide instructions anyway. Perhaps his pillow mate will agree to sing your praises to his royal brother." She looked at her son. "Mace, you will go to the capital under the guise of working out a new trade deal given the bountiful harvests we have had of late. Willas," She turned to her grandson. "You will accompany your father, we both know he will bungle this up is if we let him go unsupervised. Negotiate a deal and mention Margaery as often as possible without being too obvious. Portray her as a clueless maiden with her head full of gallant knights and the like. As for you and I, my dear," She said now resting her gaze upon her granddaughter. "We shall remain here and once your father and brothers have whetted the prince's appetite enough, we shall join them in the capital and go from there." She concluded. "Try and befriend this new Hand, Mace. Suggest food shipments and whatnot for the North. It won't hurt to have the ear of the King's pet wolf."

Father and Willas looked pleased, as did grandmother. Margaery also felt glad for finally getting things moving towards their goals, but at same time couldn't help but feel a little apprehensive about how things could go wrong. The King might decide that a Tyrell is not trustworthy enough to marry in to the royal family, as they had only dipped their banners after the capital had been
sacked and the rebellion effectively over. Which was to be expected given that they owed their status as a Great House to the Dragonlords.

'At least I'll be able to do something about the living conditions in the capital, it would help establish a positive image of House Tyrell,' She comforted herself with the thought of helping those in that cesspit of a city. 'Perhaps if the smallfolk love me enough the King will be more inclined to accept the betrothal. If not, at least a few less men, women and children will go hungry.'

Her father and brother had departed for King's Landing a week ago now.

Margaery wished she had gone with them to see the capital but she knew she would see it soon enough. She was enjoying the time with it being just her and her grandmother; it had been too long since she was able to enjoy any amount of time that wasn't spent scheming.

She knew the goal at the end would be worth it, but it still did not sit completely well with her. She resolved to make all of the scheming and political manoeuvring worth it when she was the queen by doing her best for her people.

Determined to enjoy a lighter time with her grandmother before being called to play the great game, Margaery set out for Olenna's favourite area of the gardens to take the air with her. Smiling at the servants she encountered along the way, she felt more at ease interacting with others who weren't playing the same game as she was. It warmed her heart to see the children of the household staff playing with not a care in the world. She missed what little amount of that innocence she remembered before the scheming started.

'My children will not grow up in such a way,' She silently promised. 'They will be loved and taught the right way of ruling, but they will have a full childhood.'

Picturing herself as a mother always made her feel giddy; she positively adored children. And they seemed to feel the same way about her, as even the most unruly of children would rein in their behaviour for the chance to play with 'Margree' and her ladies.

The smile that was on her face quickly slipped off as she picked up the sound of grandmother's voice. Who she could be talking to she had no idea, as this part of the gardens was for the Tyrells only.

"...things, for certain, but how can you be sure?" She sounded concerned yet excited. "It wouldn't be the first time someone claimed the same thing."

She didn't recognise the voice that replied, it was difficult to determine the accent, as if the owner was consciously distorting their voice.

"I assure you it is genuine. I've sat on this information for years waiting and watching," There was little emotion in this voice. "I have not been made privy to any plans of yet, but I intend to commit wholeheartedly to any that may arise."

An eerie feeling washed over her, as if she had been spotted but she knew that couldn't be as she was concealed by the courtyard screening her grandmother had built for privacy.

"I shall take my leave of you, my lady, it-" The voice said to her grandmother.

"Why? We're far from finished here," She interrupted. "If you expect our support for the silver haired ponce then I need-"
"It appears your lovely granddaughter is waiting to see you, my lady. Far be it from me to hinder such cherished memories from being made."

"Margaery-" Her grandmother called.

How did they know she was there? She'd made no sound and no one could see her from where they were sitting. She'd been taught how to move silently with grace for just such occasions but apparently it was not enough for this master of intrigue. And what was that feeling that washed over her? It revolted her so much she felt the urge to bathe for a moon's turn.

She stepped out from behind the screening and smiled guiltily at her grandmother and her guest - but there was only Olenna looking around in confusion.

"Who were you talking to, grandmother?" She asked with a sweet smile.

"Apparently a ghost, my dear, how much did you hear?" She was not going to be the doting grandmother until she got her answers.

"The voice said they had known something for years and that it was genuine, and that they would give their support to whatever plans are put in place." She dutifully answered. "How did you know I was there?"

Her grandmother considered her and, apparently satisfied, nodded at a seat for Margaery to take.

"I did not," She shrugged. "One moment he was looking at me and the next he was looking in your direction as if he could see you through the wall. It was a little unsettling, truth be told."

"Who was he?" At least she knew it was a man, the voice had been difficult to determine his gender. "Why was he?"

"My dear, there are many men of whom you should never speak, not even in your own home," She said with seriousness lacing every syllable. "This man happens to be one of them, as you've seen - or rather haven't seen - he is not an easy man to follow and what is dangerous about a man difficult to follow?"

"They are difficult to predict and so make for the worst enemies." She immediately replied, her grandmother's lessons instantly coming to the surface.

She nodded with a small smile.

"So, what were you discussing? Was it about the King and the prince?" Margaery attempted again.

"Yes and no. I will tell it straight, my dear, but do not think of repeating it to anyone else," She was deadly serious yet again, "It is no exaggeration when I tell you we could all lose our heads if we're suspected of any of it. Do you understand?"

She paused and considered, as she knew her grandmother would expect her to. In truth, Margaery had felt a shiver of fear move down her spine at the words. What could be happening that has her grandmother concerned? Did she really want to know about it, much less be a part of it?

In the end her curiosity won out.

"I understand, I shall say nothing of what you tell me. Not even to father." She promised.

"Oh, thank the Seven for that. Your father would ruin this House in an instant with such
knowledge." She settled in her seat and fixed her granddaughter with a piercing look. "The man told me of a possible plot to restore the Targaryens to their rightful throne. That there was an heir with a stronger claim than the mad king's spare son. And that this plot might very well be underway soon - if not already."

This she was not expecting. She knew well enough that the mad king's two surviving children were living in Essos, but an heir with a stronger claim than the prince would have to be the son of his older brother, Rhaegar. All of his children were dead, though. The stories of their brutal and needless murder filled Margaery with a rage she rarely felt. She would never have allowed any involved in such heinous crimes to live - much less marry their daughter to the King. They all knew who commanded Gregor Clegane.

"Are we to change our plans then?" She asked. "Are we going to wait until this other plot is proved to be in motion or to join with the Baratheons and face it with them?"

She had really hoped for a conversation that didn't involve scheming, but it seemed not to be. Perhaps if they abandon the whole thing entirely she could have a peaceful afternoon.

"I'm not sure, child," It was strange to see the Queen of Thorns at a loss. "If there is a Targaryen restoration, we will be in a much better light given how we only surrendered after they were deposed. If we marry in to the family that usurped them then we'll be just another House in line to pay." She rubbed her face irritably, something she only did when distressed. "If there is another prince out there, we know nothing of him like we do this royal cunt. None of that will matter if your new husband is made a head shorter a few weeks after your wedding."

They both lapsed into silence, neither of them knowing what the best course of action would be.

They had just sent father and Willas to the capital to begin laying the groundwork for her to be presented to the King. What if they were in the capital if this restoration occurred and killed in the midst of it? She despaired at the thought, her father and brothers being slaughtered like the residents of King's Landing when Tywin Lannister sacked the city.

"Should we call father, Willas and Loras back?" She asked her grandmother.

"No, dear, I worry for them as well but that would be too suspicious," Olenna replied. "As loathe as I am to admit it, the best we can do is wait for this man to-"

She broke off looking confused, and a little unsettled, as she looked at the spot on the table she'd just lifted her glass from. Placing it down again, she picked up a small piece of parchment and gazed at it with her expression becoming even more bewildered.

"What is it?" Margaery asked leaning forward.

Her grandmother just shook her head and crumpled the parchment and tucked it away in her dress.

"Grandmother-" She insisted but was cut off.

"We will speak no more of this, not today," She commanded. "I will need to get a raven to your father and brothers. Suffice it to say if my suspicions are correct, we are well and truly out of the loop." She rose from her chair and steadied herself on her walking cane. "You are to learn all you can about the Starks and the customs of the North. Do you understand?"

"The Starks? Why?" She was thrown by the command.

"Because I'm telling you to, my dear, that's why," She paused to consider her next words. "If I am
correct then they will be closely tied to this potential plot, I shall say no more until I have more than guesswork to say. Now, I'm off to write that letter. Good day, my dear." And she hobbled off.

Margery was at a loss. Why would the Starks be tied to a plot to restore the Targaryens? Aside from the fact that their Lord was now serving as Hand of the King to his best friend, the Targaryens were responsible for the brutal deaths of their former Lord and his heir, as well as kidnapping, raping and murdering Lyanna Stark. Why would they want to see that same bloodline restored to ruling the realm?

She walked the familiar path back to the library and searched for all the books she could find on House Stark and the North. Settling down with a few volumes to begin with, it was clear this would not be dull reading as she learned more about the King Who Knelt, The Old Man of the North and Brandon the Builder.

The tales of the ancient Kings of Winter who had called this land home for thousands of years before any Tyrell, Baratheon or Targaryen. So many stories to discover, she only hoped she didn't have enough time to read them all and that her grandmother would determine their next step soon. She really could not bear waiting any longer being reminded of the simple life outside of the great game that was looking even more appealing as it grew more complex.

'If only I could settle for less than being queen,' She chided herself. 'Still, the realm needs someone like me. I'm no holy woman without selfish thought, but I do want to do good.'

If only the rest of the players were of a similar disposition. The game would be over before the board had even been set.

'But then I wouldn't be queen,' She thought. 'And then it would only be a matter of time before the realm started a new game.'
Once more on a ship being guided by her Lord to see his will done.

It was easier this time as the captain had allowed her to light her fires. After she had saved him from a tight spot using some of the gifts the Lord had bestowed upon her, he'd been more amenable to her Nightfires. This helped to keep the memories of her first few voyages on a ship largely buried.

Their time at Dragonstone was brief, but they accomplished all they needed to. Melisandre had met one of the stags she'd seen in her visions - the middle Baratheon brother. He seemed a dutiful man, but unyielding and without an ounce of charisma. If he were to be king he would not be a popular one. She knew he was not the one who would bear the Crown of Light.

The king who was destined for the Crown would be connected to the wolf, the only animal to not be destroyed by the Crown. Acquainting herself with the rest of the Great Houses of this land had allowed her to make further sense of what she had seen. The Baratheon’s sigil was a stag, she already knew. The Lannisters boasted a lion, and all followers of the Lord of Light knew that the dragon represented the Targaryens and Blackfyres most of all. The wolf - direwolf - was the sigil of the oldest Great House. House Stark. The Kings of Winter.

She knew she would find her king in relation to this house. Perhaps it was the reigning Lord of Winterfell? His son? She wasn’t sure, and would not speculate until she reached their ancestral home.

They were still a few days away from the northern city known as White Harbour. From there they would travel to Winterfell and attempt to integrate with House Stark. She knew it would be difficult as they were staunch followers of the Old Gods of the Forest. Did they know that her own God counted them as brothers and sisters in ancient days?

She did not think so, but she would remind them.

Melisandre had felt it when they crossed in to the North. The land was brimming with arcane power, the power flows through this kingdom like molten lava does deep in the ground. She could feel her own power grow stronger as she got closer and closer to their destination.

It was not only her power that was becoming stronger, however, but also that of the blessing she found on Dragonstone.

Looking in to the large brazier she constantly kept aflame, her thoughts returned to her discovery of this great gift.

The Lord of Dragonstone, Stannis Baratheon, had quickly discovered her presence on the island. Not that she had made any effort to hide. When asked what her business was on the island, she told him she was here to spread the word of the Lord of Light to all who would listen. Her gambit had paid off. The Stag was not a religious man and so dismissed her as a potential threat.

It was more difficult to convince him to allow her access to the caves she felt pulled towards, which she learned contained a massive amount of obsidian, or dragonglass as it is called in Westeros. Eventually, he agreed to allow her access on the understanding that she would have a
guard with her and that she would pay the thief's price if she were to steal, no matter what God she served.

Yes, Stannis was not a charismatic man but he was certainly a fair one from what she had seen thus far.

Once she was granted access to the cave system she had to determine which of the three guards she'd been assigned would be the easiest to convert. She could have used less gentle means, but she needed to at least act the part of a religious missionary.

She found her mark in the youngest of the guards assigned to her, a man named Garret. He seemed hesitant at first but quickly opened up to the Lord of Light once she had demonstrated an illusion or two. After he was completely converted and agreed to leave with her once her mission was finished, she informed the captain that they would be departing that night. Finally, it was time to discover what was calling to her in those caves.

She had rendered the other two guards unconscious with a tiny amount of sweetsleep in their wine, having caused them to lower their guard a little using her feminine wiles. Now, she and Garret were in the cave system and she was following the pull she felt without hesitation.

It took her deeper into the earth than she thought possible, though the walls of the caverns remained wide and open, as they descended the heat rose and it was only the Lord's protection that prevented her from being overwhelmed. Garret had to stay back at a certain point as he was in danger of collapse. Carrying on alone she found her way much faster to meet with a face from her visions.

It was the dragon's skull! It looked huge in her vision but in person it was even larger. Melisandre was a tall woman, but even if she were twice her stature she would still be short of reaching the eyes of the skull. Judging by the bones littered around its own she thought she knew which dragon this was: the Cannibal. A dragon rumoured to have called this island its home since before the Targaryens arrived. It was most likely true, as she knew well enough that this was no ordinary dragon - if there were ever such a thing. The followers of the Lord of Light knew the reason the Cannibal would accept no rider, no matter how pure their Valyrian blood.

The sorcery that the Valyrians of old used to bind and bond with dragons affected the species in more ways than they knew. Over time they became less elemental, less primal, and eventually the only species of dragons thought to exist were the enslaved beasts of the Valyrians - and the few that retained enough of their parent species power to break away from their enslavers, which were then called wild dragons.

These dragons, these primal dragons, were a good deal stronger than any of their enslaved cousins - unless they had overwhelming numbers. It was not known, even to the followers of the Lord of Light, if any had survived the Doom. Not all of them called the Valyrian peninsula home, of course. Some were sighted as far as Sothoryos, and perhaps ancient legends of ice dragons were in fact primal dragons not seen for what they were. They had not been seen for millennia, yet here lay the bones of one before her.

To have seen such a beast in life would have been a sight to behold. She had seen dragons as a child but then the Doom struck and she never saw them again. Their eggs on the other hand, she had seen plenty of those as the priests of the temple would track down and acquire any eggs they heard of. They knew the Lord's champion would wake the dragons once more.

She turned to look around the Cannibal's tomb. It was clear the dragon came here to die, as there were no signs of struggle or anything to suggest a violent end. Why here, though? And why was
she still feeling the pull even as she stood in front of the impressive, but very dead dragon?

'There is something else here,' She realised. 'It is not the bones of a dead dragon that has called me to this place.'

Calling on the Lord to bless her, she felt the warmth pool behind her eyes as her inner fire banished the shadows from her sight. The cavern was much larger than she anticipated, the dragon would have been able to spread its wings in this space. She looked around the cavern hoping to find what was pulling her so intently. She had just finished her second sweep when she turned her attention back to the dragon's bones.

And there it was! Just beneath the bones of the left wing joint, as if the living dragon had tucked it under its wing.

Hastily moving forward and ducking under the immense bones, she beheld the reason for her visit here at last.

A dragon egg.

Not just any dragon egg but a **primal** dragon egg.

She had seen enough of the Valyrian eggs in the temple vaults to know that this was not one of the corrupted dragons of the fallen Freehold.

It was almost twice the size of a Valyrian dragon egg. Black like the obsidian that lined the walls, with lightning-like patterns of purple and white that sparkled in the light of her torch as if they were gemstones. Touching it, she didn't feel the heat she usually felt from the Valyrian eggs she had touched, she felt a stranger, more potent power radiate from its cold, hard shell. She knew she was meant to find this egg, it would serve the Lord's champion well.

"Lord of Light, I thank you for this great gift," She intoned with reverence. "I will see your champion's mount to them, so that they may ride it into that night which is darkest."

She bent down to pick up the dragon egg, it was heavy enough to cause her to use all of the strength the Lord had given her. She doubted a regular man could lift this alone. The egg was so large it looked as if she were cradling an infant as she made her way out of the great dragon's tomb.

When she found Garret looking exhausted on the rock he was slumped on, she was proved correct by her assumption. She placed the egg on the floor and asked him to carry it for a while, he was awestruck at seeing such a wonder but could not even move it an inch.

"H-how are you able to lift that, m'lady?" His eyes were bugging with admiration and fear as she hoisted the egg once more.

"The Lord of Light grants many gifts to those who serve him faithfully," She told her latest disciple. "And we are serving him greatly; his champion will have need of their dragon in the night to come."

"Is that where we are headed next, m'lady?" He asked. "To find the Lord's champion?"

"Yes, time is not on our side." A thought occurred to her and she chided herself for not asking sooner. "What do you know of House Stark? Of the North?"

"I've been that way a few times, guarding a shipment here and there. It's a cold place, m'lady," He began. "But the people there are hospitable, take guest right mighty serious in the North they do.
As for the Starks, m'lady," He paused to catch his breath, the combination of walking up the steep floor of the cave, talking and the heat noticeably taxing him. "Beg pardon, m'lady, I'm not used to this. I've not been to Winterfell before but they're well-known even outside of the North. Noble and honest I hear people speak of them. Their lord is the new Hand of the King, m'lady."

So the Wolf Lord serves the Stag King? Does that rule him out as the possible wearer of the Crown?

"Why would the King choose a northern lord to be his Hand? I had the impression that the North was mostly cut off from the politicking of the south." She said.

"Well, the King and his new Hand were friends. They grew up together before the war and Robert became king," He whispered as though this were some great secret. "The King was supposed to marry his new Hand's sister but she was taken by the Dragon Prince before he could." He shook his head at that. "The way my pa spoke of him, I wouldn't have believed it, m'lady."

Yet more information to consider, but she would have to do so later. They had just left the cave system and would have to hurry to reach the ship before the guards recovered from their spiked wine. She knew the captain would have everything ready for departure, and she was eager to head North and begin her search for the king in the lands of the Wolf.

"What the fuck is that you're holding?" The captain said as soon as she stepped into the rowboat. "That's never been a-"

"Keep your voice down, friend," She urged. "We cannot be seen, just focus on getting us to your ship and on our way."

He nodded but his eyes were fastened on the dragon egg. She would have to watch him, she knew, his heart was not yet ready for the Lord's purpose and he no doubt knew how much gold he would get for such treasure.

They reached the ship in what seemed to be no time at all. Melisandre returned to her cabin and placed the egg in her brazier. Luckily it was just wide enough for it to fit without smothering out the flames, though it was still too big to fit entirely. She would keep it here until they reached the North; to keep it warm and to prevent anyone from taking it. Just as she turned to exit her cabin and ensure they were under way, the flames suddenly darkened and she turned towards the brazier and was astounded by what she saw.

The egg was absorbing the flames it was resting in, and soon it would run out of fire to consume. What is this? She had seen many dragon eggs placed in fires and they did nothing, let alone absorb the flames as if feeding.

'Perhaps it is because this is not the egg of a corrupted dragon?' She thought 'Regardless, if it consumes flames it must have more.'

She took out her dagger, which only ever tasted her blood, and drew it across her palm. Calling on the Lord of Light, she allowed her blood to drip into the fire and as soon as it made contact with the flames they soared higher and brighter. It would be enough; a fire kindled by blood burned longer than normal fires. She would have to keep doing this until they reached land, she knew.

'A small sacrifice,' She smiled to herself. 'And one the Lord will repay.'

She knew those words to be true as she opened the door to her cabin with her once more undamaged hand.
"So, you're taking a dragon egg to the North, all so you can give it away to someone?" The Captain asked incredulous. "If you're wanting to give it away, I'll take it off your hands and my ship is yours for the rest of time itself." He finished chortling.

He was still no closer to understanding his role in the Lord's plan, but she had a good opportunity to explain some of it to him.

"Could you hatch this egg, good captain? If so, then we need not reach White Harbour."

"Do I look like a bleeding Dragonlord to you?" He replied gruffly before looking suddenly wary. "Do you know how to hatch it?"

"I do, for certain eggs, at least. It's a fairly simple process, but this is no ordinary dragon egg." She reeled him in a little bit more before beginning to sow the faith in his heart.

"What's so special about this egg? It looks more like a slab of obsidian encrusted with amethysts and diamonds than a dragon egg. Were it not for the shape of the thing I would never have realised what it was."

She had to agree with the man on that. The closer she looked at the egg as she regularly fed the flames with her blood, it became apparent that the purple and white patterns that resembled gemstones seemed to actually be gemstones. At times they would pulsate, much to her confusion.

'When you are born,' She said to it in awe. 'You will be a wonder.'

"Just as there are dogs and there are wolves, there are dragons and then there are dragons, do you understand?"

"So, this egg is to a regular dragon what a wolf is to a dog?" He looked confused. She couldn't blame him. "And is this because your Lord of Fire has blessed it? It's his dragon he sent in to the world or something?"

She had not been expecting that answer, not at all. Perhaps the Lord was working to soften his heart as well as she? She thought on his words and felt excited at the possibility of them being true. She could be feeding her blood to the mount of her Lord! The same dragon he might ride in his own realm. The prospect filled her with immense joy and satisfaction.

"It would seem so, yes," She answered the captain with her usual air of mystery. It was necessary to maintain the illusion and thus her potency as an agent of the Lord. "This dragon will be mounted by only one in this whole entire world, I do not know how it will hatch. If it were the same way as other eggs then it would already have done so by now." She did not really think how strange it was that the egg had taken her blood and fire, yet hadn't seemed close to hatching. "I dare say only the one it is intended for may know how to birth such a creature."

"And this is the one we're attempting to find? What makes you so sure they'll be in the North?" The Captain asked.

"We?" She asked with a knowing smile.

"We. If you think I'd miss a dragon being born your Lord should give your head a wobble." He chuckled before his face resumed his usual calculating expression. "I still expect to receive payment, mind you. You priestesses are good for it, and I'm serving your God without knowing his
plans unlike you."

"I do not know the Lord's plans, dear friend, only what he reveals to me for my own mind to make sense of," She answered with conviction. "I could have misunderstood all the Lord has shown me and we're sailing towards our death. It is faith that separates a fanatic from a devoted follower."

"I didn't think there was any difference between the two." He answered with a bitterness she had never heard in his voice.

Could she be getting closer to finding the right way to open this man's heart to the Lord? Had he already had dealings with her brothers and sisters that had not ended well?

"A fanatic would never doubt that their God is telling them all of the answers directly," She decided to ignore his tone. For now. "A devoted follower would never doubt that their God is showing them only enough for them to decide on how best they might serve. It is only the Lord's privilege to know all that it is to come and we who serve him need know nothing more than that."

The Captain was quiet for a long time, his gaze focused on the sea. She could all but hear the thoughts running around his head.

'This is how I get to him,' She realised. 'This man has been marked by a God. Not my God, but the mark remains nonetheless.'

She placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled briefly before turning and taking her leave. White Harbour was in sight and with it the next step in her journey.

She would find the Hidden King. Whomever it may be she would fulfil her duty to the Lord and the world of the living.

'From a slave in chains to a harbinger of the champion of life," She mused to herself as she once again gave her blood to the champion's egg. 'The Lord is most merciful, and I must prove myself worthy of such an honour before him and his champion.'

And she would.

Chapter End Notes

So, the dragon egg.
I know in canon (as far as I know, correct me if I'm wrong) that the magic the Valyrians used to bind and bond with dragons such as the horns and blood magic, there is no mention of it changing them physically. In my story, however, the means they used to 'control' dragons eventually led to the birth of a new species of dragons - and the egg that Mel found is one from the older species (parent species if you will).
I got the idea to call it a Primal Dragon from the God of War series - the Titans came before the Olympians and so they were more elemental in appearance. This will apply to this dragon and it will have a few more tricks up it's (if dragon's have them) sleeves. It is going to be a black dragon but it will be as dark as the dragonglass from the TV Show - so much darker than Drogon.

I have ideas for how it will be hatched - no funeral pyres as I wanted to do something different. One thing I can't decide on is a name lol so if you have any suggestions as to
what Jon might call a dragon I'm all ears!

Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed!

PS,
For anyone still struggling with Catelyn's sudden turn - I intend to make sense of it in the upcoming chapters set in the North. She cannot forget all the years she conditioned herself to feel a certain way, but in my story she had reasons to not go fully "it should have been you" which is one reason I omitted Bran's base jump so there would be no such scene.

Again, thank you to all that continue reading!
Ned felt immense relief now that the truth was no longer his burden to bear alone.

Yes, things were strained between his brother, wife, nephew and himself, but at least there were no lies between them now. Instead it was the consequences of his lies that caused them to keep their distance from Ned.

Despite the pain in his face and back, he knew he deserved the small beating Benjen had given him and so he made no move to defend himself. It meant delaying his trip until his bruises had faded enough so as not to present himself wounded. He suspects this was Benjen's intent so he couldn't run off to the capital before speaking with Jon.

Jon.

He knew he had failed Lyanna, and that hurt worse than any wound a man could inflict on him.

He had kept his promise to his little sister and protected her son from those who would kill him, but he had failed to protect him from his own cowardice and devotion to his friend. It had startled him when Benjen had called the Iron Throne Jon's - because his initial reaction was to defend Robert's claim to the damn thing. He had not been aware of his choice to put Robert before his family's well-being, not truly, until that moment. He would have sent Jon off to the Wall were it not for the God's intervention; the last of his little sister rotting away at such a place was a crime he had very nearly committed.

And for what? He risked the legacy of Lyanna passing from this world, his song unsung, all because he didn't want to take the throne from his friend who had no true claim to it with Jon living - at least not a blood claim. He had grown up with Robert in the Eyrie; they'd been brothers to one another more so than their actual brothers but as a Stark he should not have allowed himself forget how important blood was.

He felt unworthy of bearing the Stark name. Let alone being the head of the Great House. His shame was so great he felt he should depart for the Wall instead of King's Landing. He knew he could do no such thing, now now that the Gods had chosen the unworthy Stark to prepare the world for their champion.

He did not fully understand why they chose him but they have and all he can do is prove himself worthy. It would not be easy but he had sworn to his sister to protect her son, and if that meant putting him on the throne should Jon so choose, then he would back him to the best of his ability. As devoted as he'd been to Robert, he would not have hesitated to raise arms against his friend if he had come with the intent to hurt Jon - that much he knew to be true and so he consoled himself with that knowledge.

Of the three of them, it was his wife who was giving Ned the benefit of the doubt - but that did not mean her ire was any less than that of his brother and nephew.

They were sat together in his solar for the first time since that evening. They had spoken a little about what transpired but today would be the first time it was the main subject of their meeting. She would give him the chance to explain his side of the events and his reasons fully, but she did not promise anything more than that.

"You were at Riverrun throughout the rebellion, Cat. You didn't see all of the carnage and death.
All the people I killed," He paused to gather his thoughts, the memories still causing him sadness and regret. "If I had told Robert or the realm about Jon then, Robert wouldn't have had Tywin Lannister's beast kill him - he would have done it himself."

He bowed his head in shame at knowing the truth of his own words. The truth of the man he had put before his innocent nephew.

"Benjen was right; Lyanna didn't love him. My father knew it. Brandon knew it and I knew it. Still, father and I insisted the betrothal go ahead." He knew his older brother would have done things differently, perhaps Jon would be sat on the throne now had he been raised by Brandon. "Father wanted influence in the south and I wanted to call Robert my brother for true. I was selfish because it was my own interests that motivated me, whereas my father was selfish for the future of House Stark."

"I understand why Jon had to be hidden away from Robert, and why the children could not have been told until they were old enough," His wife finally spoke. "What I cannot understand is why you did not tell me, once I had proven myself a loyal wife. What was your reason for allowing me to despise an innocent boy?"

"Howland suggested we pass Jon off as Brandon's bastard, but I would not dishonour his memory and so I decided to claim him as my own," Ned answered. "He said that you would not take kindly to that, that no wife would, but I knew it would help sell the lie. If my wife were to be seen being a mother to my bastard, it would only be a matter of time until someone realised the truth - or at least knew there was more to it."

"So you used the hatred you knew I would feel for being made to endure such a dishonour to protect your nephew's life?" Cat asked in a measured voice.

"Yes, Cat-" He started in a relieved tone before being cut off.

"And what about his life here? Do you think he has had a happy childhood? I know he has not," Shame started to creep upon her features, but the anger that was directed at him remained the dominant emotion. "Because I could not look past my own pride to show him the kindness he should have known. I suspected, hoped rather, that he might have been Brandon's bastard. That you kept him here as your own because he was the last piece of your brother and you would not dishonour his memory. You allowed me to be the villain of your lie, and you expect me to believe it was all for Jon?"

She looked at him expectantly and he knew he would have to be completely honest.

"As I said the other night, when Jon was old enough and the wounds were no longer fresh, it was more about keeping Robert on the throne." He felt his shame deepen even further as he admitted the truth. "The realm would have been subjected to war once more, but it wasn't just that. I didn't want to see Robert off the throne because I believed he would be a good king - just to spite the Targaryens, if nothing else."

"Ned-" Cat started.

"It was all for Robert these last few years. Since the Greyjoy rebellion I knew it was all for him." His voice broke with emotion now he was finally admitting the truth to himself and his wife. "Jon was here and no one paid him much notice."

"Except me whenever he entered my sight!" She thundered. "I would have played the part when necessary, I know how to put on a false front. You ensured that boy was deprived of what every
child should know. All because of your friend! Your friend who laughed when the bodies of
babes were laid before him!"

She took a deep breath and continued to speak and the words hurt him more than Benjen's head
breaking his nose.

"When he was ill and like to die, I sat with him. I wiped the sweat from his brow, I helped him use
his chamberpot and I fed him what little broth he could eat. Do you know what the boy said just as
he fell asleep for what we all feared would be the last time?"

He shook his head, remembering that day well enough and knowing the answer would be
devastating.

"He said he wished I were his mother so that I wouldn't hate him and could care for him all the
time. Then he wouldn't have to be alone," She choked out as tears began to spill from her eyes. "He
was thankful to have been so close to death because he now knew what a mother's love felt like -
the love I would have freely given him had you not been so selfish! I cannot pretend I instantly
love him, even knowing the truth, but by the Gods I am going to make up for my part in his
suffering."

Tears of his own fell down his face. He couldn't look at his wife. How could he have been so
blind?

_Because you allowed yourself to be, child. You might not choose what your eyes see before you, but
you can choose where to direct your gaze._

"Where are you going?" Cat asked as he shot to his feet. "W-what is it?"

He was looking around the room. He knew he had heard the voice, but he wasn't anywhere near
the Godswood. How could they be speaking to him here?

"I-I heard-" He began but didn't know how to explain or even if he should, but he decided to try
anyway. "I said there was something else I needed to tell you, something-"

"That will not be as believable as the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms being raised under my
hateful nose?" She finished for him. "I remember. What is it?"

"You will think me a madman, but I need you to try and see past that reaction," He had to ensure
she did not jump to any conclusions. Though he could hardly blame her. "Can you do that, please?"

Concern flashed across her face at his words, and then thoughtfulness took its place as she
answered.

"I will try," She nodded. "But I doubt anything could be less believable than that."

"I would not have told Jon, nor you the truth, I would have sent him to the Wall and took the secret
to my grave but," He took a deep breath, knowing that his next words could send his wife running
for the maester. "The Gods showed me what would have happened to this family if Jon remained
unaware. I saw horrible things happening to you all-" He broke of at the memory of seeing his son
dead with his head being hacked off and his wife's throat being slit to the bone. "Do you remember
when you found me in the Godswood? When you told me about Jon Arryn?"

She nodded but said no words, her face was as white as Jon's wolf.

"They'd just finished showing me and telling me what I-"
Not yet, Eddard Stark.

He gulped but changed tack immediately.

"What I needed to hear in order to do the right thing." He finished.

Catelyn was silent for what felt like hours, all the while looking at Ned as if he were sickening. She finally spoke and Ned wasn't prepared for her reply.

"Robb in the hall of the Twins, on the floor with crossbow bolts in his chest?" She whispered with wide-eyes. "Did you see that?"

"I-I-" He couldn't believe she knew. "H-how-"

"I have been having the dream ever since Robert announced his visit. I knew it was the Twins as I'd been there with my father," She was sobbing once more. "It always ended the same way, just as they were about to-to cut his-"

"I know Cat," He said reaching forwards to hold his wife's hand. "You see the knife before you and then it ends?"

She shot her feet and started backwards, fear written over every inch of her face.

"How c-can you possibly know th-that?" She whimpered.

"Because that was one of the things they showed me." He answered trying to keep his voice controlled. Luckily he had ensured they had absolute privacy. "I cannot tell you all of it, but this is why I told Jon the truth. There is something coming-"

She is not ready to know. Stop.

"I can say no more, but please, do not think me a madman." He begged his wife.

"Your Gods have shown you this?" She asked her voice still shaking and face still white.

"Truly. I know how this sounds, but we saw our son's body in the same place and the same-" He could not finish it. "We both saw the same thing. And that is why Jon had to know."

She resumed her seat and so Ned did the same. She looked to be calming herself down through sheer force of will. Ned admired that about her.

"Does Jon know why you told him? Who prompted you to tell him? She asked her voice steady once more.

"I, er, I believe he also had an audience with the Gods," He admitted. "After I told him who his father was, he collapsed and his eyes were-" He remembered the way Jon's eyes turned pure white and the blank expression over his face, it had given him many a night terror in the short days since. "Different. He didn't start breathing again until Benjen and I put him against the weirwood tree." He finished looking at his wife.

She took several deep, steadying breaths before looking at him dead in the eye. Not an ounce of anything other than determination on her face.

"I will not rest until I have atoned for the harm I have done to our nephew. And as long as I call you husband, I will hold you to the same task. Do you understand?"
He nodded, shame preventing him from saying anything else.

"You will have to leave soon, so make the most of the time to try and help him understand and make sense of his life now." She resumed speaking, "I do not believe us both seeing our son in such a-" she gulped. "State is mere coincidence. I have always felt the Seven in my life, so I cannot doubt your Gods in your own. I do not understand it all and I expect you to explain it all to me, when they permit you." A thought must have crossed her mind. "They speak to you, don't they? That's why you were so startled earlier, wasn't it?"

Again, he nodded. He didn't want to risk speaking and risk saying more than he should.

"What a strange land this is," Cat said more to herself than him. "I will focus on what I understand, and will give you the time to rebuild as much with Jon as you can. Do not expect gratitude for telling him the truth, at least not yet. And do not expect my forgiveness to come as quickly either, I understand you kept your nephew safe as you promised, but you denied him the love he so desperately needed - and I played my own part in that as well. Benjen, well, you denied him the truth and let him believe every trace of his sister was gone. I cannot say if he will ever forgive you for that. But try."

She stood and made for the door, turning with her hand on the handle as she did the night the truth came out.

"You shouldn't waste any time, go to Jon and see if he will speak with you." She left the room and Eddard to his thoughts.

'She's right, but the boy has been avoiding me,' He mused. 'He could be in his room or the Wolfswood for all I know. Benjen won't speak to me until I have spoken with Jon. How can I do that if he won't even look at me?"

_He is with us. Come. Do not speak of the enemy, but hold nothing else back. He is not ready to know of the enemy but there is another on their way to help make him ready._

'Who?' He asked, still in awe of the fact that he is talking with his Gods and they were answering. 

_That is not for you to know, child. You may know as much as this: we are not the only Gods preparing for the long slumber that will soon fall upon us, and the world. Now, come._

* *

Jon was standing before the Heart Tree with his back facing Ned.

'Did he feel this afraid when he found me where he is now standing?’ Ned wondered.

It had only been three days since Jon learned the truth of himself, and Ned had spent much of those three days imagining what he would say, what he would do, when Jon would finally speak with him.

Now was the time to find out, even though his mind was blank.

"Jon, I, er, know I am the last person you want to-" He began.

"Is that truly my name?" Jon interrupted. "It doesn't sound like a Targaryen name."

"It is the name I gave you. Your mother, she," He didn't know how to word it without causing him even more harm, but he had to try. "She was not able to name you."
He said nothing to this but merely continued to stare at the tree. Ned couldn't imagine what he must be feeling, to find out his entire life had been a lie.

"She might have named you," He spoke suddenly remembering. "There was a letter, for you, along with all the others we found. It was in Lya's handwriting."

"If she gave me no name," Jon said finally turning to face him at last. "Then how do you know it was meant for me?"

Jon did not look well at all. His face was more pale than usual, the bruises around his eyes made him looked as if he'd been punched, he looked unsteady on his feet and Ned knew he had hardly eaten these last few days.

"It was addressed to 'my dragonwolf," Ned answered, hoping that doing so might quicken his nephew's recovery. "We assumed it was you the letter was meant for."

"What did the letter say?" Curiosity had replaced the flat voice he had been speaking with.

"I don't know, Jon, it is for your eyes only." He smiled.

"And the others? What were the contents of those?"

Ned took a deep breath and looked at his nephew closely, ready to change tack if necessary.

"Among them were letters from Rhaegar's former wife giving her blessing, proof of the annulment of their marriage and proof of your parent's own." He stopped in case Jon wanted to speak, and then continued. "All of the official documents were too dangerous to keep here. I, er," He did not want to admit what he knew now would have been a great betrayal, but he knew had no real choice if he wanted his family to heal. "I wanted to destroy them all, but Howland convinced me to allow him to keep them at Greywater Watch."

The look Jon gave him as he spoke was withering. He could not blame the boy for reacting in such a way, he had been a fool. All these years he had been a fool who thought himself honourable.

"You would have destroyed the proof of who I was without even giving me the chance to know?" He had every right to be angry. "Did you think I would shout and bawl for a throne I have never seen? Do you think there is anything I've wanted more than knowing my mother?"

"No, I realise now-"

"You realise that you've been lying to yourself as much as you have the rest of us? You put your friend before your family. Your friend who allowed the knight who killed my true siblings to live." He spat at Ned. "How you, the noble Lord of Winterfell could support such a man I'll never know."

The words cut deep, especially coming from Jon. Especially because they were the truth.

"Have you any questions?" He asked in an attempt to veer the conversation away from his shame. "Anything else you'd like to know about your mother?"

He almost flinched at the look that crossed Jon's face as he spoke. He looked like a predator that wasn't interested in a merciful hunt.

"Uncle Benjen has already told me enough," He answered. "I daresay I'll learn more when I visit with this Howland Reed."
"For what purpose?" Ned was shocked. "Surely you do not mean to-

"Tell me what the Gods allowed you to see in your vision," It was a command, and Ned felt the compulsion to obey much too strong coming from one so young.

He was told to hold nothing back, but to not mention the enemy to Jon. That role was meant for another.

"I-I saw this family ruined. Sansa was stripped and beaten before King Joffrey. I saw Robb's corpse being decapitated. I saw Robb's corpse being desecrated. Catelyn was killed in the same room and I saw my father and brother's demise at the hands of the Mad King-

My grandfather," Jon interrupted speaking more to himself than Ned. "My grandfather killed my other grandfather and uncle."

Ned had never thought of it that way, he had not allowed himself to think too much about Jon's family beyond the Starks. He imagined the boy was attempting to find a way to blame this on himself.

"It was, horrible, to say the least," Ned whispered. "And I saw-" He gulped but he was ordered to tell Jon everything. "I saw you dying in the snow at Castle Black."

He could not meet his nephew's eyes as he looked up at him. He imagined his face was full of betrayal.

"My death? You saw my death?"

He nodded. Words failing him.

"So, I am meant to go and die at the Wall? This is the God's will?" He could tell Jon was trying to sound indifferent but he had known the boy long enough to detect the anger and fear beneath his facade.

"No, Jon! The Gods have shown me this so that we might prevent it and focus on the-" He broke off remembering their warning. "There are things I cannot tell you. Not because I do no wish to but because they have commanded me not to." He pointed at the Heart Tree as he spoke. "There is another who must tell you these things, it seems."

"The man? The one uncle Benjen said was here that night?" He asked.

"No, not him. He was here for-" He could not risk speaking this openly about the man. "He has known the truth of you for years, he means you no harm I'm certain of that. He will prove a valuable asset should you wish to claim Robert's throne-

"Robert's throne? Robert's?" Jon's fury was instant. "The throne he justified taking because my mother loved another? It was your father and brother who were slaughtered. My siblings that were butchered before they even had a chance at life. And yet you say the throne is his? Why did no one dispute his claim? You fought as hard as he did in the rebellion, you were the first in the throne room. Why him?"

Ned did not know what to say, he regretted his careless words and now Jon looked as if he were going to emulate his uncle and assault Ned.

"Robert was the only one among us who had Targaryen blood," He began hesitantly. "Jon Arryn,
your namesake, was sure Tywin Lannister would demand a Great Council to elect a new king. We all knew he would have won through bribery and deceit and so Jon suggested Robert on the grounds of his blood relation to the Mad King, along with the Right of Conquest."

"And if I should press my claim?" Jon asked with a hint of fear in his voice.

Ned did not need to think about this. He decided long ago who he would choose should it come down to Jon's life or Robert's.

"I would support you, I wouldn't be glad to see my friend dead but," He looked his nephew in the eye. "You are my blood. As much a Stark as Robb and Sansa and the rest. Winterfell would follow you and so would the North." He smiled a little. "They may have no love for Targaryens, but the son of the She-Wolf would bring all but the most stubborn northerners to our side."

Jon was allowing himself a small smile as well, it did much to soften his features.

"Is that what she was known as?" He asked sounding excited at learning more about the mother he never knew.

"Aye," He chuckled as he answered. "She was much like Arya, worse, in fact. Never afraid to speak her mind no matter who it was she was speaking to. Unlike Arya she refused to even attend sewing classes once she decided she hated them," Jon laughed at this as well. Ned knew his youngest daughter was the one Jon was closest to. "She was a brilliant rider. Better than any of us, without a doubt."

He was pleased to see the smile that was full on Jon's face. His eyes looked to be distant as if allowing himself to be lost in imaginings. Ned decided to allow him this much, and did not break the silence that followed.

"I do not know if I can ever forgive you, not fully," Jon finally spoke. "I have felt alone my whole life, I hoped for my mother each day and you knew all along it was hopeless. Your wife hated me for living-"

"She hated you because I-"

"Allowed her to believe I was proof of you besmirching your wedding vows? I'm aware. She came to my chambers that night, and told me her reasons and begged my forgiveness. It surprised me, she was looking at me without the hateful glare," He pursed his lips in thought. "I appreciated her kindness that night, but I told her the same as now tell you. I was innocent, even if I were your bastard I should have been spared all the hurt. Do not think me ignorant of his this has affected you."

Ned looked at his nephew, trying not to hope for being forgiven so quickly.

"It cannot have been easy for you, and we all would have been executed as traitors if I were discovered," He sighed. "This is all too much. And now the Gods are using us for their own ends," Fear flashed across his face as he spoke. "I saw, something, in the darkness the Gods brought me into. It was a monster. Is this what you saw? What you say is coming?"

'Jon has seen it to?' He wondered. 'Why then would the Gods forbid me from revealing it?'

'We did not show him. We underestimated his power in our realm and he lingered too long. The enemy found him, and all would have been lost had he not repelled him."

'How can any man have power in your realm?' He asked in awe.
"Father-" Jon's voice broke him out of his thoughts.

He looked pained at the reflexive way he addressed Ned. Yet another thing for Ned to feel ashamed for.

"It is still so fresh, I cannot help but think of you as-"

"I know, Jon. As unworthy as I am of being your father," He tentatively reached out a hand to touch his nephew's shoulder. "I am as proud to call you my nephew as I would my son. And from now on, I will always be there for you. No more lies." He finished with a promise.

Jon allowed a half smile on to his face, before stepping out of Ned's grip on his shoulder.

"I need to go and find Ghost," He wasn't looking at Ned. "It is much easier to think clearly with him around. I will see you at evening meal, fath." He nodded and walked away from Ned.

Ned watched him leave with a heavy feeling in his heart. He knew he was responsible for the majority of his suffering and he hated himself for it. How different would thing be if he had revealed the truth sooner? Even if only to Catelyn.

He would make sure to speak with Jon again before he departed. He owed the lad as many answers as he could give. He also hoped he would be here for when this other person came to inform Jon of the threat, but he could not keep delaying his journey south; perhaps avoiding Benjen is a good thing or he'll never make it to the capital if he's forced to recover from another beating. He knew he must face him, though, he owed him almost as many answers as he owed Jon and still owed Catelyn.

'I will do right by my sister and her son,' He vowed once more. 'I will make up for failing him and betraying her memory. Even if that means going up against Robert.'

"I promise," He said to the Heart Tree.

You may not feel as strongly once you are before your friend. This path requires conviction. There is more at stake than your own life and honour. You will not find an easy way through what is to come in the south, even with all we have shown and will show you. We offer you this chance only once, you may leave our sight and be relieved of your charge but know that if not you, there may be no other who can prepare the world.

"I have been a coward for many years," He said without hesitation. "I can admit that now. I will not forsake the duty you have given me, as I did the duty my sister charged me with on her deathbed. I will do all you ask of me and will see this world readied for the coming darkness. I swear by the, well, you." He finished lamely.

Then there may be hope for this world yet, Eddard Stark.

Feeling more hopeful and less exhausted than he had for a while, Ned departed the Godswood and decided to pay his respects to his late sister. He would make this right, he would not rest until the world is safe and his family can finally be at peace.

And Jon can finally have the love I never should have kept from him.
To say that Catelyn had a lot on her mind would have been an understatement. Just two moons past she was preparing for a visit from the royal family, and now she was dealing with the knowledge that they were a royal family built on blood. Of course, she knew that that had always been the truth - Robert won his throne by right of conquest, but it was the blood of a murdered prince and princess that secured his reign.

Catelyn had never met the royal children, though she'd heard that they were the greatest treasures in their parents lives; as all children the Gods entrust their parents with should be. They all knew that Tywin Lannister's beast had killed them on his orders, but she always thought that Robert only pardoned the man because he knew what Tywin's death would have done to the war ravaged realm. She never would have expected him to laugh and celebrate the deaths of two innocent children and their equally innocent mother. This was not the friend Ned had described when he shared his stories of his fostering in the Eyrie, and yet it had been Ned that had told them this.

She decided right then and there that Robert was no true king to her. Yes, she would still be forced to acknowledge him as such and do her duty, and she would. She did not think any man who would condone, much less glorify, such brutality deserved to call himself king of civilised folk.

'How you can still call such a man friend, Ned,' She thought to herself. 'I will never know.'

Her husband who had always been so caring and affectionate with their children, supporting and loving a man who would have slaughtered his nephew just for being born, the idea was strange to her but she had heard many strange things these past few days.

**His nephew.**

The bastard boy she had always hated to see and hear. The bastard boy she resented for befriending her trueborn children and speaking with them as though they were equals. The bastard boy she had commanded to be housed in the servants quarters of the castle.

The bastard boy who was no bastard.

The bastard boy who was not equal to her children but above them.

The bastard boy whose ancestors had built this castle.

The bastard boy whose ancestors united the Seven Kingdoms.

It was all too much to take in. She couldn't imagine how the boy was dealing with it all.

A part of Catelyn had always hoped, deep down, that the boy was not her husband's bastard but that of his brother, Brandon. The brother she was supposed to marry. She knew Ned would have kept whatever piece he had of Brandon close, and that he would not have wanted to shame his brother's memory by claiming he sired a bastard whilst betrothed to a daughter of a Great House. But Brandon Stark's reputation was known even in the Riverlands, and so it was a surprise to hear that his solemn brother had fathered a bastard when the more virile Brandon had not. Perhaps that, along with the memory of that broken little boy lying abed like to die, was the reason she had never truly forced Ned to send him away.

A part of her wished knowing his parentage was enough for her to bring herself to love him as she
should, he was after all her nephew as well as Ned's, but too many years had passed for it all to just
disappear in the wake of the truth. Yes, she had gone to him on the night they had all learned said
truth, but that was mostly to clear the guilt that came crashing down upon her - the same guilt that
she had kept from affecting her treatment of the boy. She did not want to see him suffer such a trial
alone yet she still felt the same slight revulsion at being close to him.

Thoughts of that night sent her mind back to her interaction with the boy she had despised simply
for being.

She had knocked gently on his door several times before deciding to enter without a reply.

Benjen had said that he was in a poor state, which was understandable given all that he had learned
in such a short amount of time. She expected to find him asleep on his bed, too exhausted to see
anymore of this confusing day. She would have understood that.

When she saw that he was wide-awake on his bed, staring into the fire and not even acknowledging
her presence, she had to restrain the urge rebuke him for ignoring her - to not perform that reflexive
act of reminding him of his status.

"Jon," She began, the word sounding foreign on her tongue. "Your fath-"

"He is not my father," He interrupted her. "If you are here it is because he has told you as much."

Again she had to fight against the urge to scold him for interrupting the Lady of Winterfell. Again,
she had to remind herself that this was a boy hurting and a boy that was of the highest birth in the
realm. She gathered herself for a few moments before continuing.

"Yes, he just told your uncle Benjen and I. I-" She was at a loss for words, never having imagined
herself ever being in this situation. "I can understand it must be a shock for you, the Seven know I
am shocked myself. I can only imagine-

"I do not think you can, my lady," Once more interrupting her. "Nor can I understand why the truth
of my birth brings you here. Surely you should be in your sept, lighting a candle to your Seven for
removing the stain that was my bastardy."

"How dare you?" That time she had not been able to restrain herself. "I am the Lady of Winterfell,
and you forget your station. You will show me the respect I deserve, bastard."

She regretted it instantly. He was no bastard but a prince of the Seven Kingdoms. And she had just
insulted him and reminded him of how awful she had been to him all of his life.

When he turned his head slowly to look at her, she felt fear crawl up inside of her. His wolf raising
its snowy head from where it lay just as slowly only increased said fear.

She had never felt directly afraid of this boy, certainly she had feared what his presence might
mean for her trueborn children and their future, but not this.

'Would he loose his wolf upon me?' She was terrified but knew that it would not happen, deep
down. That did little to calm her fear of the white beast as it fixed its eerie red eyes upon her.

"Why are you here, my lady?" He asked flatly though she could still hear the crack in his voice.

"I-I-" She cleared her throat and attempted to calm herself. "Your uncle said you were in a poor
state, and I thought I would come here and offer what comfort I could."
He only stared at her and she was once again struck by how different the boy was from the usual meek bastard. She knew he was not staring to make her uncomfortable, but because he knew there was more to her visit than her concern for him.

"And I wanted to apologise," She admitted. "The way I have treated you all these years, I cannot imagine what it has been like but-" She could not think of a good enough reason to justify her actions, so she tried to make him understand it from her perspective. "All these years I feared you would be a threat to my children's claim to Winterfell. That you look more of a Stark than any of them, apart from Arya, only made it worse. I was angry at your father for shaming me, and then forcing me to live with that shame and watch it- you grow up alongside my own children. It was infuriating and demeaning."

He looked down with a thoughtful expression. He reminded her of Ned in that moment, when he would also pause in a conversation to gather his thoughts and consider his words.

"Tell me, my lady, how much of that was I directly responsible for?" He asked in a tone of forced politeness that did little to disguise the venom underlying his words.

Shame flooded through her at his question for she already knew the answer. He had not asked to be born. He had not asked for his husband to lie for him. He had not asked to be raised at Winterfell. He had not asked for any of this.

"None of it. You were responsible for none of it, Jon," She looked down at her own feet, feeling unable to look at the boy. "I know I am responsible for much of the suffering you endured in your childhood and until today. If I had known the truth I swear to you that I would have been different. Your fath- uncle kept us all in the dark. I was a means to strengthen the lie as he said."

He stood up suddenly and she flinched back. His expression softened as he slowly shook his head.

"Forgive me, my lady," He said as he moved to pull the chair out from under his desk. "Despite what you may think of bastards, not all of us are prone to violent outbursts." He finished as he indicated for her to sit on the chair as he moved to resume his seat on his bed.

"You are not a bastard, Jon," She said as she sat down and arranged her skirts, assuming the posture of a lady. "Your parents were married before the Old Gods and the New."

He took a deep breath at her words and held it for several seconds before bursting out in a fit of manic laughter.

She was concerned to see the usually sullen boy laugh so erratically. It was clear it was not humour that was causing him to act in such a way. Not knowing what else to do, she simply waited for it to subside and attempted to force down the growing urge to flee from the room.

'He is no madman,' She attempted to reason to herself. 'He has had quite the shock. It is understandable his emotions would be frayed.'

"I thought that I must have misheard my father-" He broke off with a pained looked on his face. "When Lord Stark said the words in the Godswood. I was scarcely aware of anything other than the desire to flee. I-" He hesitated as if unsure of what to say or, more likely, if he wanted to say it to her. "It is all too much to handle. I learn that my mother was the sister of the man I had always known as my father. That my father was the man I had been raised to hate for kidnapping, raping and killing my aunt who is actually my mother. How does one make sense of their entire life being revealed as a lie in one night?"
She did not know how to answer that. Catelyn had never had to experience what the boy was now going through, but as uneasy as she felt sitting and talking with the boy she usually avoided, she had a desire to help him ease the anguish written so clearly on his face.

"I do not know, Jon. If I had answers I would freely give them, but-" She broke off as he chuckled slightly at her words, not the unsettling cackle he had loosed earlier but a small laugh of genuine humour. "What?"

"Fath-" Again he stopped himself and the pain on his face intensified. "Lord Stark always used to say that anything before the word 'but' is horseshi-" He let his voice die to stop himself from cursing in front of her but she knew what he was going to say.

'He has the manners of a noble despite growing up believing himself a bastard,' She thought to herself. 'All this time I assumed he merely knew how to act and was a crass person when alone. Just how wrong could I have been about this boy?'

"I have heard him say such things on occasion," She said with a small smile forming on her face. "Usually when talking about his dealings with the Glovers."

Jon laughed a little more at the statement, and she was surprised to feel a small swirl of affection at seeing his face ease just a little. She had always attempted to stifle any emotion she felt towards the boy - besides her fury and bitterness whenever he entered her sight.

This brought her back to the reason for her visit to him. The real reason. In Ned's solar she had convinced herself that the sudden rush of emotion was sympathy for the boy, but now she knew it was guilt. A crushing guilt that she had kept at bay with her pride and anger at the insult that was her husband's bastard. Now, she learned that she had done nothing more than add to the trauma of a boy who would never know his parents, a boy burdened with bearing a name that only evoked suspicion, anger and mockery. Mostly from her.

Yes, she did not want the boy to suffer but she did not want herself to feel this way - the shame only adding to the guilt she had always buried. It was almost too much with the guilt of having broken a promise to her Gods. She had to at least make this right, and pray that the Seven would be merciful when her time in this life was at end.

"I am truly sorry for how I have acted towards you. I denied you every bit of affection I could, not just from myself but from Ned and my children. Though, only Sansa truly obeyed me in that," She felt unable to stop the words pouring from her mouth, so intent on easing her guilt was she. The boy did nothing but watch her with his tired, pain-filled eyes. "I swore to myself once that I would be a mother to you, you know. You were gravely ill as a child and-"

"And you cared for me. I remember, my lady. And I remember what I said to you when they thought I was beyond hope." His expression took on a hint of anger. "I fell to sleep that night and I had a dream that I woke up and all was well. That you were my mother and I could play with Robb without you scorning me for something I could scarcely understand." He was looking her dead in the eyes and it was all she do to not shrink away. "When it became clear the worst was past, you remained by my bedside. I thought my dream had come true, that I would be a mother to you, you know. You were gravely ill as a child and like to die and-"

"And you cared for me. I remember, my lady. And I remember what I said to you when they thought I was beyond hope." His expression took on a hint of anger. "I fell to sleep that night and I had a dream that I woke up and all was well. That you were my mother and I could play with Robb without you scorning me for something I could scarcely understand." He was looking her dead in the eyes and it was all she do to not shrink away. "When it became clear the worst was past, you remained by my bedside. I thought my dream had come true, that I would not be alone anymore. You remember what happened then, I'm sure."

She did remember, as clear as if it happened only yesterday.

She had fallen asleep at his bedside, the relief of knowing he would live allowing her to end her vigil. She had imagined telling Ned to have the boy legitimised and being a mother to him. Certain that it was the right thing to do, but then it was ruined. She awoke to a slight tugging sensation on
her forearm and she knew it was Jon wanting her attention. Just as she was about to ask what he needed, he said something to her, his mind was still fevered she knew, but it caused her to react in a way that shattered the heart of the little boy before her.

**Mother.**

She jumped to her feet and the bitterness and hatred came rushing to the surface once more. Her anger at being called mother by the bastard whose actual mother had tempted her husband replaced all affection she had in that moment. She told him, spat at him really, that she would never be his mother and that he would always be a bastard and then she left, unable to look at the heartbroken expression on the little boy's face.

It was seeing that face in memories that brought a wave of tears to her eyes. Tears that fell mostly from guilt but also for the boy whose life she had made a misery. The boy who never wanted anything other than unconditional love and to not be alone.

I-I am truly, truly sorry, Jon," She said. "I can offer no ex-excuse for my behaviour. You were innocent, a prince and-"

"Even if I were an actual bastard, what had I done to deserve such hatred?" He asked in a calm voice that was replaced with a shout as he continued. "I was a child! I did not whisper in Lord Stark's mind to bed my mother and sire me so that I might shame you. All this fucking hate for bastards yet no one bats an eye at the noble lord who sired them! Beyond a few pointed whispers and reminders of their inability to resist their baser urges." He took a deep breath and continued in a lower voice, no doubt attempting to calm the wolf that had shot to its feet at his outburst. "All I wanted was to feel a part of this family. A true part of it. Regardless of who my mother was, you were a mother and yet you could only show me the affection I craved when I was like to die. You never failed to remind me of who I was, what I was, after that. And I grew up alone in a castle surrounded by family. A family you stopped from loving me openly - thus making me feel even more ashamed at having only the secret love of my family. Do you have any idea how it feels to shiver alone at night alone because your father's wife sent you away from the rest of your siblings? I had my family around me, but you made it very clear I was not a part of it."

She could not utter a word. Every second that passed filled her with more shame, and now it was more than guilt that caused her tears to fall with renewed vigour as she looked at the bastard boy turned prince.

"I do not know what will happen beyond this night, my lady, nor do I wish to think too much about it. You came here, not just because you wanted to ensure I was well but to ease your own guilt." His voice was once more one of forced calm, yet there was no mistaking the fire in his eyes. "I do not know if I can ever bring myself to forgive you. Yes, you were a pawn in Lord Stark's schemes, but you were still the best weapon he had to convince the world of my bastardy. You were the most successful of my tormentors but here you are the first to come and attempt to make amends." He stood and walked to the fireplace, placing a hand on the head of his snowy wolf. "It is appreciated, and I wish it would make me feel more than just regret, longing and anger but it is appreciated nonetheless. Though, I do not see what more can be accomplished this night. Is there anything else you wish to say before leaving?"

Her shock at being dismissed was replaced as quickly as it came as she looked at the boy before her. He was no meek bastard asking to see Arya when she was ill, only to scurry off at her scathing look. No. This was a prince. A descendant of the man who forged the Seven Kingdoms.

It startled her just how quickly the boy's body had accepted the truth of himself, when his mind so
clearly had not. He did not hunch his shoulders or lower his chin; he stood there proud and unwavering. A Targaryen. A king.

"Only that I will do my best to attempt to earn your forgiveness," She whispered with a voice thick from tears. "And I vow, to the Old Gods and the New, that I will be an aunt to you should you wish it. I will do my best to atone for my part in your suffering."

She did not know what else to say, she was still conflicted about how she truly felt for the boy. It had been so long she had allowed the bitterness and anger to close her heart when thoughts of him crossed her mind. She knew she had to try and this time she would do her absolute best to not break this promise.

The boy nodded and attempted a small smile that he quickly gave up on. He walked to the door and held it open for her.

"Would you ask my uncle to come and see me when he is able, Lady Stark?" He asked of her as she passed him in the doorway.

"Which-" She began.

"Benjen, my lady," He answered.

She nodded her head as the door closed and quickly darted off down the hall. She was overwhelmed and the tears would not stop as she returned to her husband's solar.

She would make this right. She could not bear to suffer this guilt any longer, but she had to. She had forced the boy to endure the same emotional pain all of his life.

"Please, mother! Make him change his mind, please!"

It was the day of Ned's departure and Sansa was doing all she could to convince her father to take her with him.

"Sansa, as I have told you many times, your father does not wish for you to go with him," She repeated for what felt like the hundredth time.

"But I would be queen one day!" Sansa wailed. "I would have loyal subjects and be able to sit with the ladies at court. My husband would be a powerful king and I would be the queen! Please, mother!"

It had been a nightmare ever since Sansa had learned of the betrothal Ned had refused. Sansa had been worse than ever, especially since Arya still insisted on calling her 'your grace' whenever they crossed paths.

Given all that she had learned of the boy's father, Catelyn was glad her eldest daughter would not be near the prince and his family. She may not be ready to hear the truth of King Robert or her cousin the prince, but she is more than ready to accept the truth of her position.

"Sansa, I will say this one more time and if I have to repeat myself again you will be punished." She adopted the stern voice she had never really had to use with Sansa. "Your lord father has decided to reject the betrothal and declined to take any of us with him when he goes to serve the King in the capital. It is your father's right to accept or refuse any who ask for your hand. It is my duty to carry out my husband's will, and that means I cannot attempt to change his mind on this matter.
'Not that I hadn't tried to,' She thought to herself. 'But now I wholeheartedly support the choice, Ned.'

"This is not the behaviour befitting a lady, Sansa," She knew the lady card would work to settle her daughter somewhat. "You are acting more like your sister than the proper lady I know you to be. Now, is this the last I will hear of this?"

"Yes, mother," She answered in a flat voice.

The defeated look on her face was not something she enjoyed seeing, but she would not have her precious daughter anywhere near a man who was capable of finding humour in such violence.

"Very well. Then let us enjoy the rest of the day before your father leaves," She said to her daughter with a smile.

The castle was bustling with everyone preparing for the Lord's departure. They all made way for Catelyn and Sansa as they walked towards the great hall where the rest of the family would be. They would be having a luncheon before Ned had to ride out for the capital.

Entering the great hall she saw that Robb, Arya, Brandon and Rickon were already there but no Ned or Jon. She was not sure what she would say if Sansa were to ask why Jon was invited, but she was sure Ned would offer a suitable reason.

"Your Grace," Arya said in a solemn voice whilst bowing in a mock fashion.

"Mother!" She began to wail as the boys started to laugh. "Tell her to stop! It isn't fair!"

"Please, both of you, let us have a quiet meal while your father is still with us," She all but pleaded with her children. She wanted to savour every moment they were all together, even if she and Ned were not on the best of terms. "I expect each of you to behave yourselves and show your father that he has raised noble lords and ladies, not beasts."

"Yes, mother. I will keep the troublemaker in line," Robb said looking pointedly at Arya before looking at Sansa. "Perhaps if you name Arya to your Queensguard she may no longer mock you, Your Grace." He said as he began to laugh along with the rest.

Even Sansa chuckled at that as she sat down next to Bran, and Catelyn felt a rush of affection and joy at seeing all of her children together, laughing and jesting with one another. It was a peaceful moment, despite all of the noise and loud banter filling the room.

Ned had joined them by the time the children had settled down. He had barely sat down before Bran was firing questions at him.

"Why can I not go with you, father?" He asked with a pout. "I wish to be a knight someday, and perhaps I can squire for a knight in the capital!" His eyes lit up at the possibility. "Oh, please please!"

Ned smiled sadly at him before answering in a kindly tone.

"The capital is no place for a Stark of Winterfell, my boy. When you have seen a few more namedays, we will talk of finding you a worthy knight to squire for."

This placated Bran enough for him to begin engaging Rickon with tales of his destined greatness. Arya had, as expected, also asked the same of her father.
"When can I be a squire?" Her voice was full of hope. "I am older than Bran and it wouldn't have to a knight from King's Landing!"

Ned and Catelyn exchanged knowing glances as their wild daughter was speaking. Both had to look away before they broke out into laughter.

"Sweetling, one day you will meet a knight or a lord and you will marry him, run his castle and your sons will be knights. Perhaps you could teach them what your dancing master is teaching you." He answered with a smile.

Arya looked thoughtful at the idea, and Catelyn herself was smiling at the possibility of grandchildren one day. The smile was wiped off of her face as her daughter replied.

"No, that's not me." She said with finality. "I don't want to be a wife or a mother. I want to be a warrior and travel the world and see and do things that no one else has done before." She finished with a decisive nod of her head as she turned her attention fully to her meal.

Ned looked torn between exasperation and pride. People often compared Arya to her aunt Lyanna, and it must have made Ned equal parts sad and happy at having another reminder of his sister.

Thought of the goodsister she had never met turned her attention back to the one missing from the table. Benjen had already returned to the Wall after one short conversation with his brother.

"Where is Jon?" She asked Ned. "I told him we would be having a family meal at this time."

All of her children looked at her in mild shock, aside from Bran and Rickon who were still talking about knighthood and adventures. Ned looked as if he was trying hard not to smile but Catelyn was at a loss as to how to handle her children's reaction.

"Since when do you want Jon to eat with us?" Her fierce daughter asked, ever protective of her favourite brother. "You're always mean to him and never let him sit at table with us."

She looked at Ned, hoping for some help but he seemed at a loss himself. Knowing it would fall to her to concoct a reason that was believable, she decided to answer with a half-truth.

"Jon is-" She cleared her throat to speak words she had never thought she would utter. "Jon is a part of this family. He is your blood and your father cares for him as he does the rest of you. I have been wrong to treat him as I have and that shall end now." She looked pointedly at Sansa as she spoke who looked the most shocked out of them all. "Jon is remaining here while your father is in the capital; it would not do to be at odds with ourselves while he is away."

Arya looked happy at hearing her words, Robb also looked satisfied and nodded proudly at his mother, Ned was wearing an expression of love and guilt that Catelyn felt at times. Sansa, however, was looking like all of the world had stopped making sense.

"Mother, you have always said that Jon's station does not permit him to dine with us," Her innocent voice filled with confusion.

"Sansa, your mother has just said that Jon is a part of this family." Ned spoke to their daughter firmly. "Regardless of his birth, he is as much of a Stark as the rest of you. And should be treated as such."

"We look like each other and I'm a Stark, so he is as well." Arya said as if that settled the matter.

"That's true, but he's much prettier than you, mighty warrior," Robb responded with a chuckle.
"Perhaps even prettier than you, Sansa."

This caused all of them to laugh once more, except for Sansa who looked affronted.

"I do not think Jon will be joining us, he is still not feeling well." Ned said to conclude the discussion once their laughter had died down.

"What's wrong with him?" Arya asked immediately. Her face a mask of concern.

She did not seem satisfied by the answer and Cat had no doubt she would hunt for her favourite brother as soon as she said goodbye to Ned.

The conversation turned to more pleasant topics after that, and for a while she forgot that her husband was leaving for who knows how long. And where he would be going. She simply enjoyed the time with her family whole and safe.

All too soon the moment came where they were making their way to the courtyard. She and Ned walking arm in arm through the halls and talking while the children were already waiting outside. So lost in conversation was she that she did not notice they were outside of Jon's chambers until Ned rapped on the door.

"Ned, what are we-" She began but stopped when Ned shook his head.

Ned had to knock twice more before the door opened and revealed a haggard looking Jon. He still was not eating well and it was really beginning to show. His cheekbones were always prominent in his admittedly handsome features, but now they were prominent because of the gaunt pallor his face had adopted. The bags under his eyes were still evident and there was a general air of neglect about him.

Ned stiffened upon seeing him as well, but they entered the room as soon as Jon stood aside for them.

"Jon, I know you have suffered a shock but you must start taking better care of yourself," Ned began in a tone full of concern. "It will not do for you to be as skinny as Arya by the time I return, else we'll not be able to tell you apart if she has a growth spurt."

That drew a small smile upon his face and his eyes sparkled a little. He cleared his throat before speaking.

"What brings you here? I would have said my farewells with the rest but I did not want to risk an outburst." He admitted sheepishly.

Cat also wanted to know why they were here and was about to repeat Jon's question before Ned answered.

"There are things I must tell you, Jon, and it will be easier if there is someone else here who knows the truth about you," He said to him, indicating Catelyn with a nod in her direction. "I said that there would be someone else coming to tell you more, and I suspect they will be here soon. I know nothing about them and had hoped to be here when they arrived but time does not permit."

This only added to Cat's confusion. There was more to this tale of the hidden prince?

"Is it Howland Reed? With the proof of my birth?" Jon asked in a neutral voice.

Catleyn could not help but shudder at the thought of such documents and what they could begin.
"Does he mean to press his claim for the Iron Throne?" She wondered, unsure of how she felt about the possibility.

"No, Jon, Howland will not leave the Neck," Ned replied. "It is someone who-" He broke off to consider his words. "Someone who will help you make sense of the thing you saw during your audience with the Gods." He finished glancing at Catelyn as if afraid she would run from the room.

She still found it unsettling that her husband and Jon had received visions from their Gods, but given the fate of their son they both witnessed she had no doubt it was genuine. She had prayed every night that the Seven would not subject her to such terrifying visions of their family's fate.

"I do not understand why you cannot tell me, father-" He stopped himself with a frustrated growl that unsettled them both. "Uncle, if you already know what that- that thing was, why can you not tell me instead of a stranger?"

"Because it is not the God's will, Jon. There are parts of your father's family that I cannot even begin to explain. To my knowledge there has never been a child of Stark and Targaryen blood. We cannot know what a child of such a union might be capable of." He gestured Jon's sleeping wolf as he spoke, which seemed to have grown too much in the span of a week since she had last saw it. "Look at your wolf and those of your siblings; it cannot be mere coincidence that your own has grown far larger and resembles the Heart Tree."

She had not noticed that before, being unfamiliar with the weirwood tree she found unsettling to look upon. Now that Ned pointed it out, however, it was glaringly obvious.

"What could it mean?" She thought to herself.

"And what am I supposed to do after this mystery person has told me?" Jon almost whined. The confusion already rampant on his face.

"I do not know, Jon. You will not be alone in this, and you will always have the Godswood to reflect in and perhaps the Gods will grant you more insight." He moved forward and tentatively raised his arms towards his nephew. "I know that I leave here with things still strained between us, but I swear to you I will do my best to make it right. You are a part of this family and you will never be made to feel any different ever again. Whatever you wish to do about your birthright, you will have the North behind you."

As they embraced and she saw Jon's guarded posture slacken a little, she could not help but shudder at the possibility of another war breaking out. She had no doubt whatsoever that if Ned declared for his nephew, the entire North would rise up to support their liege lord - the Boltons grudgingly so but they would nonetheless.

As they took their leave of Jon and made their way to the courtyard she could not help but imagine her husband and eldest son fighting in a war to seat their family on the throne. A part of her would have rejoiced at potentially being a member of the royal family, but it was smothered by the fear that enveloped her knowing just what it might cost them to become that family.

At last they reached the courtyard and as Ned said goodbye to all of their children, she allowed all else to fade from her mind as she embraced her husband for what might be the last time in years. Tears were prickling at her eyes as she gently kissed him and watched him walk away to mount his horse. He turned back to them in the saddle and smiled.

"Be good to one another and do not let anything prevent you from doing so," He began with a voice
full of emotion. "Remember what I have always told you: the lone wolf dies-

"But the pack survives." Their children intoned with a look of wonder and pride on their faces.

He raised a hand in farewell and Catelyn watched as he rode through the gates and out of sight. She knew this time he would not return with another woman's son. There would be no bastard in his arms when he returned, just as there had not been when he brought Jon to Winterfell all those years ago.

She would not fail her husband and her promise to the Gods. Looking upon her children she knew the danger that was hanging over their heads; danger that would fall on them like an executioner's blade should the truth come out on any terms but their own.

She will protect her family - all of them. That includes Jon, though she is still unsure about her feelings towards him she has accepted that he was family.

She had no idea what news this stranger would bring, but she would be there with him when he learned whatever it was the Gods wanted him to know. She would do all she could to repair the damage she has done to the man who may one day be her king.

Turning to face her children with a smile on her face, she took little Rickon by the hand and led them back into the safety of the walls of their ancient home. They would be safe for now, even if war was upon them they would have as many moments of innocence and love as she could provide.

"Stay out of trouble, young lady. Your father has said I am to stop your lessons if you fail to behave yourself in his absence." She said to her youngest daughters back. She was rushing off to check on her favourite brother just as Catelyn knew she would.

Smiling to herself, she imagined that it might not be as difficult as she thought to adjust to the new reality in their home.
Winterfell was still an impressive sight to behold even though he had spent weeks within its walls.

It was also a most welcome sight after almost two weeks of travelling from the Wall and its icy temperatures. Tyrion had almost forgotten what it felt like to be warm.

Yes, Winterfell would be a welcome reprieve. Just like the first time he rode through the gates, Tyrion was looking forward to a hot bath and an even hotter meal. Entering the courtyard and accepting help with dismounting from his horse, he got the impression that he was not as welcome a sight as Winterfell was to him - judging by the expression on the face of the Lady of the castle as she stood ready to greet him.

"My lord," She said as she curtsied. "Apologies for receiving you amidst all this chaos. My lord husband departed only yesterday and the castle is eager to return to normal."

"It is of no consequence, Lady Stark," Tyrion replied as he gave a small bow. "Though, I must admit I am quite surprised that Lord Stark has only just departed for the capital. I encountered his brother returning to the Wall on my way here. I trust Lord Stark is well?"

He was curious as to what could have kept Lord Stark here almost a month after the King had departed. Robert would not be happy his pet wolf had stayed longer than he had agreed to allow.

"There were some matters of family that he had to attend to before leaving, my lord," She replied with a gracious smile that did not meet her eyes. "But yes, my husband is quite well, thank you for your concern, Lord Tyrion. How was your visit to the Night's Watch?"

'She's suspicious,' He realised after seeing the guarded smile and quick deflection from furthering the conversation. 'But why? How many more mysteries will Winterfell have to hold?'

He had attempted to visit the crypts and marvel at the tombs of the Kings of Winter, but when he had asked for Lord Stark's permission to do so he was met with a frosty response.

"The resting place of my ancestors is no place for curious eyes," He had said with an obvious attempt to hide his anger. "It is for Starks, and Starks alone, my lord."

Perhaps with him gone he might be able to sneak down there and satisfy that particular craving for discovery.

"The Wall was a sight to behold that much is true. The same cannot be said for the men guarding it, my lady." He replied whilst filing away plans for his tomb exploration. "I do not see why your goodbrother would serve amongst such men. I admit, I had expected your husband's bastard to be with his uncle on the way to the Wall. I assumed that was the plan for him? He had insisted it was during our conversations."

The look that shot through her eyes was brief, she had snapped back her guard before anyone would notice. Tyrion wasn't anyone, however, and his eyes were as sharp as his mind. The question of her husband's bastard had startled her more than his questioning of her husband's delay. Why?

'This place will be the cause of many headaches, it seems.' He thought to himself, already wishing
he had a glass of wine clenched in his hand.

"The boy has decided not to join his uncle at the Wall, my lord," She answered in that same tone as before. "At least, not until my lord husband returns."

"You have my sympathies, Lady Stark. It cannot be easy to live under the same roof as the boy your husband sired on another woman - especially without your husband here." He said in an attempt to illicit another subtle reaction from her. "I mean no offence, my lady, of course not. Forgive me if I spoke out of turn."

His attempt bore fruit. As much as she tried to she could not hide the brief flash of shame that crossed her face. Again, it was subtle and would have escaped the notice of someone less observant than Tyrion Lannister.

'Just what is going on here?' He wondered. 'Perhaps I will ask the boy. He is not as skilled with lying or hiding the truth as his father's wife is. That is no mystery.'

He liked the boy, a lot more than he liked most people in fact. He looked forward to conversing with him, not just for the attempt to learn what was going on but for the pleasure of it.

"No offence taken, my lord. It can be difficult but my lord husband has commanded he remain, and so I shall do my duty and obey." She extended a hand towards the keep and made to walk to it. "Let us get you inside, my lord. I shall have a bath drawn for you and a meal sent to your room. Will you join us at table this evening, my lord?"

"I should be honoured to, Lady Stark. Thank you." He answered warmly. His desire for the truth abating somewhat in anticipation of a bath and a hot meal. "I look forward to it."

She smiled that same gracious smile, again it did nothing to disguise how she truly felt. Tyrion felt a genuine smile form on his own twisted face as he contemplated unravelling the mysteries of this ancient castle.

'Which one to pursue first?' He mused to himself. 'The tombs, the reason for Lord Stark's delay or the bastard boy who had the Lady of Winterfell on edge?'

Dinner was a dull affair compared to the feasts that had taken place during the King's visit.

True, it was refreshing to not see and hear Robert grope every servant girl that came within reach of him, but still, the Starks were not the best conversationalists. At least, the ones he was sat next to were not.

"How are you finding your new position, Lord Stark?" He asked the young man to his left.

"It has only been a day, my lord, but already I am feeling as if I am not quite the man for the task," He answered honestly. "I shall do my best, of course, my father is depending on me and I have the support I need."

At least the boy was not a braggart like most of the young men in the south; they would never dream of admitting themselves not up to whatever task they were set. Nor would they have given credit to their councillors.

"I had little in the way of responsibilities in my own home, my lord. The greatest contribution my lord father allowed me to make was overseeing the rebuilding of the castle's sewer system. That is no talk for the dinner table, of course, pardon me, my lord, Lady Stark."
The boy had just started to raise his pork chop to his mouth before setting it back on his plate with a grimace. His mother was more composed and merely dipped her head in acknowledgement of his apology.

He decided to use the opportunity to fish for some answers to the goings on around Winterfell. Hopefully the Stark heir is more like his bastard brother when it comes to lying.

"I assume you had ample time to learn from your lord father?" He asked the boy. "Especially considering how long he stayed behind after the King had already left."

"I made sure to take advantage of the additional time, yes," He answered in an honest voice, his expression betraying no attempt to beguile Tyrion. "He has set me an excellent example to follow and if I am even half the man he is I would be mighty proud." He finished speaking and looked at Tyrion, a blush started to form on his face. "Apologies, my lord, I did not mean any offence - I did not consider my words." He said with a guilty expression on his face.

Tyrion had not taken the slightest offence whatsoever. Though he was known as 'half-man' in the Seven Kingdoms, he knew that the Stark heir had not meant to sneakily insult him with his words. Nevertheless, he intended to use it to his advantage as the boy's mother had paled at the words.

"I am used to it, my lord, your apology is not necessary." He spoke feigning a hint of hurt in his voice. "Indeed, it is kinder than most names people reserve for me when they think me out of their hearing. Like your youngest daughter, Lady Stark, the day we met." He finished with a light chuckle.

As expected, her carefully guarded expression betrayed little beyond embarrassment. It gave Tyrion enough insight to know that the eyes and nose were the hardest for Lady Stark to control. The way her nostrils flared when her mask slipped, or her eyes widened slightly. Now he had his tell, he need only ask the right questions.

"I can only apologise once more for my daughter's shameful performance, my lord," She said genuinely. "Rest assured her lord father punished her for the insult she paid you."

He made a show of nodding slowly and looking down at the table, knowing that the eyes of Lady Stark and her son were upon him waiting for his response.

"I must confess, I found it rather refreshing and amusing," He answered with a small laugh. "In the south, there are not many ladies who aspire to be warriors or adventurers. Their heads are full only of songs and dreams of beautiful princes."

"My daughter has not yet accepted her role in the realm, my lord," Lady Stark answered. "She believes a lady should aspire to more than running her husband's keep and providing heirs. I am certain she will grow to accept her role in time, my lord."

The Stark heir did not agree with his mother, apparently, if the bark of laughter was any indication.

"Mother, Arya could see fifty namedays and she would still refuse to conform," He said to his mother with a smirk. "Any man father chooses to betroth her to will find himself battered and bruised - especially with that dancing master of hers teaching her the sword."

Tyrion did not think much of this information, but Lady Stark was glaring daggers at her eldest son for allowing it to pass from his mouth. Perhaps her embarrassment of having an unladylike daughter was almost as strong as her ire when it came to her husband's bastard. Thinking of the boy caused him to look towards the back of the great hall, where he was usually seated with the
servants and guards and the like. He was not there. After scanning the entire hall he still could find no trace of him.

'I have been here almost an entire day and have yet to lay eyes on the boy,' He thought to himself. 'It is as if he has vanished into thin air.'

"Lady Stark, where is young Snow? I must admit, I was quite looking forward to speaking with him, yet I have not seen him in his usual haunts."

That much was true. He had checked the training yard, the library, he had almost entered the Godswod but the place filled him with a strange sense of dread so he decided to remain outside of it. He was not sure where the boy's quarters were so he could not go there to seek him out.

"I am not sure, my lord. Jon-" She broke off and a startled expression briefly shone through her mask. "The boy prefers to have his meals alone in his chambers as of late. He is not one for company, my lord."

'In all of my time here she has always referred to him as boy,' He thought in response to her slip up. 'Yet now she had to correct herself for using the boy's name. What in seven hells is going on here?'

He knew his next step might be seen as an insult to his host, but he had to sate his curiosity - something he had been cursed with along with his dwarfism - and so he decided to apply a little pressure before Lady Stark fully recovered.

"Might I ask you a question, my lady?" He asked in a polite tone that offered no sign of his intent.

"Of course, Lord Tyrion." She agreed with that same gracious, guarded smile.

"Has Lord Stark ever mentioned the boy's mother? Only it is most unusual-" He was silenced as she rose to her feet, immediately joined by her eldest son.

He quickly took note of the expression on her face, there was no anger there or shame, only fear. No, not fear. Terror.

"How dare you ask such a question of me, Lord Tyrion?" She whispered in an attempt to hide her voice from the almost silent hall, her face once again composed. "I endured the shame of knowing such things as my husband commanded, but I will not have my guest remind me of such in my own home. Goodnight, my lord."

With that she departed for the door he knew led to the family wing of the keep. Her pace, posture and expression betraying nothing of the turmoil that Tyrion knew she was experiencing.

"My lord, I think it best that you retire for the night," Robb said to him with gritted teeth. "I trust that my lady mother can expect an apology from you on the morrow, yes?"

His voice took on a strong note, and Tyrion knew he would be best advised not to push his luck any further tonight.

"Of course, Lord Stark," He said as he rose to his feet and looked up at the boy. "I did not mean to offend your mother. I am a curious man by nature, and sometimes I allow it to bypass my common sense."

'And other times I allow it to give me the balls to ask the hard questions,' He finished in his head. Lord Stark merely nodded and took his seat, his expression rigid. He knew he should not test the
Stark's hospitality anymore this night but once again that cursed curiosity would not be ignored.

"Lord Stark, forgive me, I wonder if I might spend a little time outdoors before retiring?" He asked with all the politeness he could muster. "I think some fresh air would do well to clear my head - which I have allowed to soak in too much wine, I fear."

He looked suspicious but acquiesced with a small nod and then returned his attention back to his plate.

Tyrion made for the exit with a sense of excitement. He was going to use the opportunity to visit with the Kings of Winter. He would also use the time spent amongst the dead to make sense of all he had learned.

'I pride myself on being among the cleverest of men,' Tyrion chided himself as he walked in the near total darkness of the crypts. 'Yet like any dimwit I did not think to bring a torch to an underground tomb.'

He had barely finished descending the steps when he felt the strangest and most brutal cold yet. It was not the same biting cold of the North, or the relentless gnashing frost of the Wall. No, it was as if the ice itself was slowly spreading over his very being. He knew he was not meant to be down here, and would be leaving as soon as his curiosity was sated. Assuming he could find his way back in the dark.

There were torches lining the walls of course, but only a few were lit; perhaps half a dozen at most. The crypts were larger than he expected and from what he had learned there were multiple levels, the oldest of which were inaccessible from a collapse that occurred long ago. He hoped that there would be no such calamity whilst he was in this place.

'At least I would be in the right place,' He thought in an attempt to amuse himself. 'No need for extravagance and pomp when you die in a tomb.'

The statues of the previous Starks to call Winterfell their home were imposing. Each had an iron sword placed over their tomb, and a stone direwolf seated at their lap. In the light next to some of tombs it looked as if the beasts were moving in the corner of his eye. He shuddered.

On and on he went, stopping under each of the lit torches he passed in an attempt to garner some warmth. He only wanted to see one of the Kings of Winter - perhaps the King Who Knelt would do. Yet he had no idea how the system worked; were the more recent Starks interred after the older ones? Or were the most ancient of them in the inaccessible lower levels of the crypts?

He had just considered whether he should cut his losses and make for the exit, the cold getting to be too much, when he caught a strange glint of red out of the corner of his eye. Thinking it was a ruby decorating a tomb, he looked towards it and terror instantly gripped him when said ruby moved.

By the time it rose above him and was joined by another ruby that glinted in the light of the torches, it was all he could do to not soil himself in fear. They moved silently towards him, not a sound to be heard as the white wolf emerged from the shadow of a statue of a woman. He had seen this wolf before and it had almost towered over him then, yet now it had grown in a few short weeks and it would have to bend its neck to bite off Tyrion's head.

The wolf made no sound but he bared his teeth in a silent snarl and tensed as if ready to spring at him. This was enough for Tyrion to find his tongue again.
"G-g-good boy, er," He had forgotten the beast's name. "I-I am friends with your m-m-master, young Snow."

Instead of reassuring the wolf his words only caused its snarl to grow as it bared its teeth to their fullest extent.

'Fuck, fuck fuck fuck,' He could only think as he stood there awaiting his impending death.

His whimper of terror had just left his mouth when the wolf's snarl all but vanished and it turned its massive head back to the statue of the woman. A figure was emerging from behind it, moving awkwardly.

Tyrion would have sprinted from the place if he knew for certain the wolf wouldn't attack him for moving. All he could think was that the dead were rising and he would be their first victim.

'Is this what the maester was speaking of?' He wondered in abject terror.

Slowly the figure stepped forward and into the light of the torches, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

It was not a dead man that had climbed out from behind the tomb, but he was halfway there judging by how ill he looked.

"Young S-Snow," He greeted with a shaky voice and a nod of his head.

The boy gave no reply. He merely looked at Tyrion and with a small gesture of his hand the white wolf returned to nuzzle his side.

'What kind of man can command such a beast?' He was in awe despite himself.

"Lord Tyrion," He finally spoke after staring at him for what could have been minutes. "You should not be down here."

He knew that was the truth, of course, but he could not find the words to speak just yet. The boy cut an impressive figure despite how worn and unwell he looked. He stood there with one hand resting on the large head of the direwolf that passed his hip, and an expression so stoic it might have been chiselled from one of the tombs around them.

"Are you well, Snow? Forgive me for saying, but you look as if you should be abed."

"Well enough, my lord. Come, I will escort you out of here." He said and made for the exit without even waiting to see if Tyrion would follow. That was what the wolf was for apparently, for as soon as the boy got too far his snarl returned. So Tyrion had no choice but to follow the bastard from the crypts.

"I am surprised you were not with your uncle on the road, Snow. I thought it was your intention to join the Night's Watch?"

"How was your visit there, my lord?" He answered with a question of his own, his voice made it clear he would not be answering Tyrion's.

"Well, the sight of the Wall was something. Standing on top of it was something else," He replied despite the annoyance rising within him. "Though the strangest thing there were the men - one in particular. The last Targaryen in Westeros."

The boy stopped at turned so suddenly that Tyrion walked into him. Quickly stepping back and
steadying himself so as not to fall, he looked up at the boy whose expression was wild. Tyrion had felt the same fear rise within him as he did when his wolf had first appeared.

"A Targaryen? At the Wall?" His voice was croaky.

Tyrion suspected the reason for his sudden change was the bad blood between the Starks and Targaryens. The boy's own grandfather and uncle had been slaughtered by the Mad King. His aunt kidnapped, raped and left for dead by the Dragon Prince. It was only natural he should get so emotional about the idea of a Targaryen being so close to his home.

Strangely, Tyrion had the urge to protect the fragile but wise maester he had encountered.

"He is of no danger to anyone, Snow. He is the maester of Castle Black and he has seen a hundred namedays. Though, he sees nothing else now - what with him being blind and all." He finished. The boy's expression settled somewhat but his voice was still strained as he spoke.

"What is he like, my lord? Did you have a chance to speak with him?"

'Now why would he ask me that?' He wondered. 'Why should a Stark bastard care of the disposition of a member of the family that killed his kin?'

Nevertheless, he decided to answer the boy. The wolf that was winding its way around his tall figure making it clear ignoring the question would be bad for his health.

"I have never met a man like him, Snow. He is wise, patient and has a way of seeing through all of the masks and word games people play - myself included." He respected the man for his ability to render Tyrion speechless, something that hardly ever happened. "Though, I fear his mind may be sickening at last. He spoke most animatedly about a great evil rising beyond the Wall. The great evil it was built for, apparently." He finished with a small chuckle that he expected the boy to return, but he did not.

"My uncle never mentioned him. Doubtless as First Ranger he would have had dealings with him." The boy's tone was full of curiosity. "Perhaps I shall speak with him should I ever visit the Wall."

"So, you do not intend to take the Black?"

"No, my lord. I would still see the Wall, regardless."

"May I ask why the sudden-" Tyrion began.

"No. I shall keep the reason to myself." The boy cut him off yet again and turned to resume their exit from the crypts.

'He has changed. A lot.' Tyion's mind was ablaze with what it all could mean.

They reached the surface at last and Tyrion let out a breath he did not know he had been holding in the first place. The moon and torches were enough to illuminate the courtyard so that he could finally see. He turned to his companion only to see him already heading towards the gate.

"Young Snow, where are you going at this hour?" He asked.

"To the Wolfswood, my lord," He answered only just turning to look at him. "My wolf needs to hunt and I could do with the exercise."

"Might I accompany you?" He did not relish the idea of traipsing through a dark forest as a wolf
stalked its prey, but he needed more information to draw a conclusion. He was certain the boy would slip eventually.

'Perhaps after slipping in the woods,' He thought to himself with amusement.

"I do not think it would be safe, my lord," He spoke in a tone that offered no argument. "Ghost loses himself to his instincts whilst hunting, I fear I would not be able to stop him before he has his teeth at your neck."

There was no humour in his voice, none of the posturing that other boys would have when bragging about how deadly their hunting dogs were. That made it more intimidating somehow, knowing that the boy was merely pointing out the truth.

"Very well," He said, accepting defeat for now. "Perhaps we may have an opportunity to have a proper discussion before I leave?"

"Perhaps, my lord. Goodnight." He turned and exited the gate and out of his sight.

He began the trek back to his room, his mind puzzling over all he had learned.

'The boy is different, there is no doubt of that. Lady Stark had slipped up and called him by his name, which she must have realised was suspicious as she quickly corrected herself.' He thought in an attempt to make sense of things. 'Then there's this business that required Lord Stark to stay behind for longer than he had arranged with the King. The mood his brother was in on the road was not caused by the cold. What could all of this mean? And why was the boy skulking in the crypts behind some woman's tomb instead of spending time with his siblings?'

He had just entered his room and made to prepare himself for bed, though he doubted he would sleep as his mind was still moving faster than a galloping stallion.

'Perhaps I will learn more when I see Lady Stark and the boy interact. As for why Lord Stark stayed behind, I doubt there is anyone here who would tell me.' He reasoned to himself. 'And the boy proved more able to hide his feelings than I expected - apart from the outburst at learning of maester Aemon. Why is that? And just what could be causing the boy to look so unwell? If he were sickening with something he would not have the energy to gallivant about the woods with his beast. So it must be something unsettling his mind.'

Despite all the thoughts raging in his mind, it was Lady Stark's reaction when he asked about the boy's mother that stuck out the most.

'It was beyond fear that I saw in her when I asked. She knows who his mother is, that much I am certain of,' He thought to himself with a small amount of satisfaction. 'Though why it should cause her to react in such a way I do not know. We all know the rumours of Ashara Dayne, so it has to be more than that. But who could it be? What woman fathering a bastard by Ned Stark could cause his wife to display such naked fear? Did she suspect that I was also aware? Then that answers no questions but presents more. Who could she be?'

He was driving himself into a rage. He hated not knowing things that others did. Hated feeling as if his intellect was coming up short against others as his body always did.

'I will get to the bottom of this,' He vowed. 'I have another six days to unravel the mystery that is the mother of Jon Snow, the sole stain on the honour of Lord Stark.'
So, my version Tyrion shares some of the same observational skills as the Mentalist (from the TV show). I felt that this would be a fun way to tell the story from his POV that will contrast with those of the other characters once they've moved past the developmental stages of their characters. I have no intention of making my version of Tyrion the recruit bot he was in the latter seasons of the show.

Thanks for reading!
Melisandre could feel the power of this land more prominently as they drew closer to their destination.

Looking around at the smallfolk who called the North home, she wondered how they could shuffle about their everyday lives seemingly ignorant to the force that flowed through their land. The intensity of it caused her breath to shudder occasionally, she assumed her companions believed it was the cold that caused her breath to hitch at times; but she was never cold - the Lord gave her all the warmth she needed.

They had been travelling inland for almost four days now. They probably could have reached Winterfell in half that time, were it not for the cart they had acquired in White Harbour to carry their goods. Melisandre also insisted on spending as much time outdoors as possible so she could light her nightfires; each time she did so she could feel the power of the Great Other weaken ever so slightly in this place where it was strongest. If the price of guarding against this evil was a few nights of rough sleep, she would gladly pay it.

She had just finished tending to her fire that night when she joined her companions on the ground. They were huddled around the flames and were speaking of their mission here in this magical land.

"So, has your God pointed out who we're looking for?" The Captain asked. "The North is quite large when you're looking for a single person, you see."

"We know the Lord wants us in Winterfell, Maro," Garret had answered the Captain. "He'll make his will known once we're there, won't he, m'lady?"

Both men made good points. The North was indeed much too large to search for a single person with no lead to follow, but they had one: Winterfell. The home of the Kings of Winter since ancient times. The North is vast but no castle is large enough to hide the champion of her God.

"Yes, Winterfell is our destination." Melisandre answered with her usual air of mystery. "It is not for us to know if the Lord shall give us further insight once we arrive. Perhaps he has already given us all we need to find his champion."

"Aye, m'lady. He would not have sent us here without the means to see his will done." Garret answered.

His faith was sincere but it startled her how quickly he had accepted R'hllor into his heart. If it weren't for her gifts, she would have assumed he was attempting to beguile her, but she knew the hearts of others as she did her own. It did not make his intense fervour any less unsettling, though.

The Captain, Maro, as he wished to be called was proving to be more resistant to allowing the Lord into his heart. He believed that they were there for a reason, but his own were gold, adventure and potentially seeing a dragon hatch. She knew he would eventually be as devoted to the Lord as she and Garret were, but the resistance was still there nonetheless.

'What caused him to be marked by a god?' She wondered once more. 'And why does the Heart of Fire concern himself with one marked by another?'

She suspected Maro might know enough to answer her questions, or at least enough so she might put the pieces together, but the man was adamant about not speaking of his past. He spoke less than Garret but more than Melisandre, with most of his words being on the topic of gold.
"I could set myself up for life if I sold it to some flowery merchant prince," He was saying yet again. "Bleeding thing is wasted in the cart."

She had guarded the champion's egg closely ever since leaving the ship. She could not risk it being seen by anyone but the three of them, and so she had to share her own inner fire with the egg at night. It seemed to grow even stronger because of this, yet it was still cold to the touch - especially now that it was in the North. It was the main reason they had acquired a cart; it was simply too heavy and conspicuous for her to carry all the way to Winterfell.

"That egg belongs to the Lord's chosen, Maro," Garret answered fervently "To sell it for material wealth would offend the Lord of Light."

"It would be easier to bear the grief of offending him from a well-stocked manse," Maro replied teasingly. "Never met a problem that wine could not fix - if only by making me forget it, eh!" He finished with his usual laughter.

She knew he would not attempt to steal the egg, even though he was capable of lifting it he was unable to bear its weight for as long as Melisandre.

"You would be warm in your manse for only a short time before the Great Other's horrors find their way to you, my friend," She said to Maro with a small, knowing smile. "Should the champion of R'hllor be deprived of their mount, the world will fall to the champion of the Great Other. There is not enough wine in the world to comfort you in the face of such a fate, I fear."

Her words had once more struck him deeper than he wanted to show, but he was adept at keeping his features schooled. Still, she could tell he was growing ever more convinced of the truth.

"Well, I'll just have to settle for whatever wine they've got at Winterfell," He responded with a huff as he lowered himself to sleep on his furs. "I'll leave the watch to you, seen as how you are above such mortal needs as sleep."

And with a final chuckle he closed his eyes and before long was snoring contentedly.

Garret joined him not long after, and so Melisandre was once again staring into the flames and hoping for more wisdom from the Lord. She saw the same thing she had seen every night since leaving the ship: the large, snowy white direwolf with eyes that resembled the ruby of her choker.

'Soon, I will know our purpose in its entirety,' She thought to herself confidently. 'And then the preparations can be made for the great battle to come.'

She has seen many castles and keeps in her long life but very few of them matched the subtle grandeur of Winterfell.

The castle was not elegantly decorated like many of those she had seen before. Indeed, fortress would better describe Winterfell. This was the home of ancient heroes and figures of legends. She could think of no place more fitting than this to be the home of the Lord's champion - they would be a warrior.

Her thoughts returned to the gates she was now in front of as guards moved to block their entrance.

"What business do you have here, m'lady?" The taller of the two asked politely but firmly.

"I am a missionary for the Lord of Light, R'hllor," She answered using the same tactic as she had on Dragonstone. "I am here to spread the word of my Lord to all who would listen."
The effort the guard had to make to not roll his eyes was evident. She suspected that if it weren't for
the Stark sigil on his uniform, he would have responded in a less dignified way.

'They must command such loyalty here, these Starks,' She noted to herself. 'To cause men to watch
their tongues even when not in their presence.'

"Beg pardon, m'lady, but you'll find none within these walls that would follow any god but the Old
Gods." He spoke in a measured voice. "Be that as it may, I'll fetch Lady Stark to greet you. Mind
your companions keep their hands away from their weapons in her presence."

With that he turned and entered the courtyard to find his liege lady, while his companion ushered
them through the gates.

It was there that she got her first glimpse of a direwolf, it made her heart flutter with excitement.

It was not the snowy white one she had seen, but there was no mistaking it for a direwolf. It was
grey with golden eyes that seemed too intelligent for a regular wolf. It was not as large as the white
wolf she had seen, but it was already of a size to present a challenge to men. It was accompanied by
a small girl, she wore the clothes of a highborn lady but they were dirty and she did not seem fazed
by this as she wondered off towards what she assumed was a training yard - judging by the sound
of ringing steel she heard coming from that direction.

She had just climbed down from her perch on the cart, quickly glancing to ensure the egg was
covered from sight, when she felt a sudden searing heat flash through her heart. She turned to see a
woman striding towards her, tall and proud, her bearing making it clear that this was the Lady of
Winterfell. She had red hair like Melisandre, but it was not as vibrant. She was controlling her
features well, but Melisandre knew there was a lot going on behind her mask.

'She knows something;' She decided. It was the only reason she could think of that made sense of
the sudden surge of fire she felt as she approached.

"Welcome to Winterfell. I am Catelyn Stark, the Lady of the castle." She greeted with a curtsy.
"My guard tells me your visit is of a religious nature. Might I ask your name, my lady?"

"Melisandre, Lady Stark," She answered with a curtsy of her own. "Your home is as beautiful as it
is formidable."

She smiled at that, though it did not reach her eyes. Those eyes were guarded and she could clearly
see suspicion in them but something else as well. What was it?

"I mean no offence to your beliefs, Lady Melisandre, but here in Westeros we worship the Seven,"
Her voice took on that telltale tone of worship as she spoke. "And here in the North they worship
the Old Gods. I am afraid you may not find many willing to listen to your own God's message."

Her words were polite and controlled, no offence could be gleaned from them but the meaning was
plain nonetheless: your God is not welcome here.

Deciding to take a more direct approach with this woman, she acted on the surge of heat that
directed her towards Lady Stark as she first approached.

"I take no offence to your words, my lady, though it does sadden me to know the truth of them.
Thankfully, there is only-" She paused to place further emphasis on her next word. "one in your
home who needs to hear the Lord's message." She finished with a meaningful look at the other
woman.
Lady Stark's eyes went wide and her face paled.

'They are here,' She thought triumphantly. 'The Lord's champion is here, and this woman knows it. Perhaps she even knows who he or she is?'

Before she could ask this question, Lady Stark had recovered and found her voice.

"You must be weary from your travels, my lady." Her voice once more that of a dutiful host. "I shall have rooms prepared for you and your companions. You are most welcome here in Winterfell, so long as you are respectful of other's beliefs, of course." She finished with that same smile.

Realising that she should not reveal her hand just yet, she agreed to the dismissal, for that was what it was. She had to make sure none of them handled the champion's egg, though.

"I thank you, Lady Stark. Your hospitality would be most welcome, I confess, I am not well-suited for the cold. For that reason, I hope you will not begrudge me my brazier. It is crucial for my worship of my Lord." She spoke in a humble voice, the kind that placates those born with luxury at their feet. "I assure you there is no danger of such practices, and you have my word I will not attempt to coerce any to join me in worship, besides my companions."

Lady Stark looked as if she wanted to protest, she raised her eyebrow ever so slightly as she looked over the cart. Deciding that there was no way she could refuse her guest without insulting her beliefs, she gave a small nod and relayed instructions to a woman who had just appeared at her sight.

Melisandre climbed on to the cart and hoisted the champion's egg, whilst Garret did the same with the brazier. She knew they would not be permitted to carry the egg in to the keep without showing it to them first, so she had already decided on a plan to reveal it - somewhat.

It was well that she had done so, for as soon as she stepped down from the cart the guards had all trained their eye on the concealed object. Lady Stark approached carefully, her eyes wary as they gazed at the hidden egg.

"My lady, might I ask what this is?" She asked politely. "I am afraid I cannot allow you to enter my home with a concealed item - my children live here, I'm sure you understand."

The guards stiffening around her made it clear that this was not a request, and so she moved forward with her plan.

"Of course, had the Lord blessed me with children I would let no potential danger near them," She said to the woman. "This is a substance from the temple where I served before coming here. It is a blessed source of fuel for our nightfires," She continued as she carefully unravelled the cloth covering the egg to reveal the slightest amount of it to Lady Stark. "The obsidian is blessed by the Lord, he who sent dragons into our world to warm the night. The amethysts herald the dawn we pray for," She gestured to the purple veins. "And the diamonds ensure the light is reflected to all who would carry it with them." She finished indicating the sparkling white veins on the egg.

Here in the light of day it was easy to pass the egg off as a large amount of obsidian ore with veins of amethysts and diamonds. It resembled no egg Melisandre had ever seen, so she doubted any in the courtyard would mistake it for what it truly was.

"I apologise that my decision to conceal it unnerved you, Lady Stark," She said to the woman whose eyes were fixed on the exposed parts of the egg. "Only it is a thing of great value, for the
precious gems it contains, and so I thought it best to not tempt the weak hearts of those prone to thievery. Meaning no insult to your countrymen, of course."

This seemed to work. Lady Stark relaxed almost completely as she returned her gaze to the guards and indicated they stand down with a nod. She then looked at Melisandre with that mask securely on her face.

"I understand, Lady Melisandre. Even in the North there are those who would kill for such a treasure," Her voice was once more as guarded as her face. "You may enter our home and practice your religious rites. I shall ensure you have additional wood in your room for your practices. Now, I will leave you in the hands of my serving ladies. I have much to do in my husband's absence, I fear." She gave a genuine smile as she curtsied once more. "You will be most welcome at my table tonight, should you wish it."

"I thank you for the honour, Lady Stark. I look forward to enjoying more of your company," She said softly. "If there is anything I may do whilst I am-

She broke off as she noticed another direwolf. This one was larger than the grey one accompanying the girl, but still not as large as the white wolf. It was black with green eyes and was trotting alongside a small boy with red hair - one of Lady Stark's children she assumed.

"Fear not, Lady Melisandre."Lady Stark spoke soothingly, clearly mistaking her wide eyes for fear. "The direwolves will not harm you or your companions. Unless, of course, you attempt to harm their masters. This one-" She indicated the black wolf. "Belongs to my youngest son, Rickon. All of my children have one, as well as my-" This pause was joined with a most curious expression on her face. "Husband's baseborn son. They are not friendly dogs to be petted, but they will not attack without cause. You are safe, my lady."

"I did not know a wolf could be so large, yet they it looks to be a pup," She said to play along with her imagined fear. "And you say each of your children and your husband's natural son have one?"

"Yes, my lady. They are still pups, but they grow larger by the day it seems. Now, pray excuse me but there are duties I must fulfil. Until tonight, Lady Melisandre." She spoke before turning away.

"Good day, Lady Stark." She said with a smile.

She followed the serving ladies into the keep, her eyes darting around in hopes of seeing the white wolf.

'If there is in fact a white wolf,’ She reminded herself. 'It could be a representation of what the Lord wishes me to understand, Still, that there are living, breathing direwolves in this castle is a cause for hope.'

Three days she had been here and still there was no trace of the Lord's champion.

She knew that they must be here for that same surge of her inner fire was becoming ever more frequent. She had seen another wolf accompanying another red-headed young man, whom she learned was the heir to Winterfell, Robb Stark. She grew giddy in an almost childlike manner upon learning this, thinking that she had found the champion but he was not receptive to her and she felt none of the power she knew she should radiating from him.

The Lord had made it clear to her that she would feel it when she first laid eyes on the champion. So far, she had yet to do so.
It seemed strange for a woman centuries old to be growing impatient after just three days, but each
day that passes with the champion unrealised is another day for darkness to spread. She had to play
the part that allowed her to gain entry in the first place, however, as predicted she found none
willing to listen to the message of the Lord of Light. This only added to the frustration that was
growing within her, something she had not felt in a long time.

'What if I misread the signs?' She agonised within her mind. 'What if the wolf was a sign that I
should keep the monarch away from the Starks? What if the others could not withstand the crown
because it had been corrupted by the wolf? It certainly was an unnatural looking wolf.'

That much was clear to her. She had seen three of the six direwolves, and while there were subtle
differences between them and regular wolves, all of them matched the colouring of their cousins.
Aside from the black that belonged to the youngest Stark child they were all different shades of
grey.

She was stood on the battlements overlooking the wide expanse of land surrounding the castle. It
was truly a beautiful sight to her; she imagined it would be even more so when the snows began to
fall in earnest. Garret was stood next to her, though he did not share her opinion on the view in
front of them.

Maro was in the town nestled outside the walls, no doubt in the brothel or tavern. He had done little
to help her in their mission beyond irritating the guards with his lewd remarks. She should be
thankful that he had not directed any of them at the Lady of Winterfell, at least.

She was brought out of her musings by a gasp from her companion.

"It's beautiful," Garret said with awe and fear in his voice.

"Yes, it is," She replied confused, certain that he had not felt that way a minute before.

She finally looked at him when he spoke his next words.

"It's so different from the others we've seen, m'lady," His voice still low with emotion. "Hard to
believe it's a pup."

Her attention zeroed in on her companion. He was not looking out to the countryside but in to the
courtyard beneath them. Following his gaze, her heart threatened to burst out of her chest as it
started thundering.

It was the wolf.

The white wolf.

Just as she saw it, it had already moved beyond her sight towards a part of the castle she suspected
housed the servants.

"Come, Garret," She said to her companion, moving to follow the wolf immediately. "That wolf
will lead us to the champion. Come."

She had not felt this excited in almost a century, and it was causing her to become increasingly
frustrated as she made her way to the spot she last saw the white wolf. Excusing herself repeatedly
and moving as fast as she could without arousing suspicion, her heart dropped as she turned the
same corner as the wolf only to see no trace of it.

There was no way of knowing which way it went, and she was not familiar with the castle enough
to make a guess.

'So, so close!' She chided herself. 'If only I had been focused on the castle and not on the view.'

She would not be so careless from now on. Deciding she may as well explore to get a better understanding of the castle's layout, she turned left to follow a path to a set of gates that served as an entrance to what Lady Stark called the Godswood. She had made no attempt to visit this place, thinking it would be blasphemous of her to do so. She would burn the weirwood in the name of her God, but she needed to keep a low profile until she found the Lord's champion.

She fully intended to walk past the entrance to the Godswood, but yet another gasp from Garret caused her to pause and look to him. Once again her heart quickened.

Garret was frozen, fear evident on his face as the white wolf was standing in front of him. Only a pup and already above Garret's hips, it was sniffing intently at the shaking man.

'How did we not hear it,' She thought looking at the beast's large paws. 'There is no snow to soften its movements.'

The other wolves she had seen had acted the way all pups do: excited, barking and yipping at everything in sight. Not this wolf, though. It made no sound and its tail was motionless as it continued to hold Garret in fear.

At last deciding he was no threat, the wolf turned its large head towards Melisandre and she saw its eyes for the first time.

This was the wolf she had seen in her visions.

It approached her, slowly but surely, until it was right in front of her. She was much taller than Garret so the wolf barely reached her hips, but she doubted this would prevent it from tearing her throat out if it were so inclined.

It had yet to make a single sound. It just stared up at her with those red eyes fastened upon her own. They contrasted strongly with its pure white coat, which looked as if snow had been weaved onto its skin in place of fur. She could only imagine how fearsome this beast would be once it was fully grown and no longer had the awkward build of a growing pup.

'There is no doubt this wolf belongs to the Lord's chosen,' She thought to herself. 'Only they could command such a beautiful yet deadly creature.'

The wolf finally took its gaze off of Melisandre and turned towards the entrance of the Godswood. It trotted in there but stopped after a few paces to look back at her and its meaning was obvious: follow.

"Garret, wait here and see I am not disturbed," She said to her companion. "Use whatever excuse you must, my friend."

"Aye, m'lady." He answered dutifully.

And with that she entered the Godswood, feeling as if she were committing some grave sin against her own God. She knew he was leading her through this place as much as the direwolf but it still felt wrong.

On and on they went, the snowy wolf stopping every now and then to ensure she was still following. Finally, they entered a clearing and she noticed the weirwood tree and how it matched
the wolf that had brought her here. It was eerie, to say the least.

Everything faded as she took note of the man the wolf was now nuzzling up against. She felt it, finally.

That same power she had felt from the dragon egg was radiating from this man in strong waves; it was as if his own inner fire was that of the Lord's. He was also giving off an energy that felt even older than her God's own; as if winter itself was running through the veins of this man.

In over four hundred years of life and servitude to R'hllor, she had never felt such power in a mortal before - not even in her more powerful brothers and sisters.

She had done it. She, a former slave, had found the ancient hero reborn. Of all the servants of the Lord, it was she who had found the king who would bear the Crown of Light. It was she who would serve the Lord's champion in the fight against the Great Other's own.

And serve she would.

She cleared her throat to get the man's attention and as he turned she knelt before him.

"My lord," She spoke with all the reverence she could muster. "My name is Melisandre. The Lord of Light sent me here to guide you through the night to come. Much of what I will tell you may seem impossible but I assure you, the long night is coming and all the horrors that call it home."

She looked up to the man's face, still kneeling on the floor and she was not expecting the look on his face.

There was shock and wariness but she could find no disbelief in his features.

'Does he already know of the threat?' She wondered. 'Has the Lord already shown him the night to come?'

*R'hllor is not the only one who seeks to bring the dawn after the night to come, child.*

The voices, for she knew that more than one had spoken, resonated through her body and she could feel her inner fire blaze a little stronger for it.

'The Old Gods,' She realised in awe. 'You have already told him of the night to come. Then what is it I must do?'

*We have shown him one side of the truth. He stumbled upon the other side himself, though he knows not what it means. That is why you are here, agent of the First Fire. He must know of the champion of the Corrupted One. This is your first duty to him. Be warned, he has had much truth revealed to him as of late. Do not expect an easy task, child.*

Accepting the words of the Gods that were not her own, she held the gaze of the man the Lord has chosen and waited for him to speak.

'Now, the work truly begins.' She thought with a mix of anticipation and terror.
MARGAERY III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Margaery had always enjoyed travelling and seeing the rest of her homeland, but that was before they began their journey to King's Landing.

She had been eager to set out for months since they'd decided now was the best time to put their plans into motion. The death of the former Hand of the King, Jon Arryn, added complications to those plans when the King decided to travel to Winterfell for his new Hand. And then all the reports they'd received caused them to delay further. Finally, it was now time to make for the capital.

"Assuming we get there before I am an old crone," Margaery thought to herself in frustration. They had been on the road for four days now and were still in the Reach. Granted, progress was expected to be slow as they were travelling in a wheelhouse with most of Margaery's possessions, and she knew she would be grateful for them all when they finally reached the capital. Still, the limited company and being cooped up in the wheelhouse was growing more and more frustrating by the day.

"We need to ensure we reach the capital before this new Hand, my dear," Grandmother answered when she asked why they could not stop for an hour to stretch their legs. "He may not be travelling with his daughter, but she could just be waiting to travel by ship once her father is in the capital. Getting you in front of the crown prince is crucial; even if the Hand does summon his daughter when he arrives it will make little difference if we already have a marriage contract with the crown."

"I understand that, grandmother, but it would only be for an hour," She persisted. "Do you not wish to stretch your own legs and get out of this stuffy box?"

"Of course I do, dear, but that extra hour we idle could be the extra hour Lord Stark decides to spur his horses on faster," Olenna replied. "He is travelling with men and minimal possessions, and we have a wheelhouse and who knows how many carts with us. Our being closer and relentless pace is the only advantage we have in reaching the capital first." She leaned forward and placed a gnarled hand over one of Margaery's own. "You will have plenty of strolls with the crown prince, my dear, just be patient."

Her father and brothers had been speaking with the King for almost a week now since he had returned to the capital. Their new trade deal would have to wait to be finalised until the new Hand arrived, but father and Willas had shared many meals with the King and had spoke often of her. The King was most eager to lay eyes on the Rose of Highgarden, and so they received word to set out for the capital and set off almost immediately.

She was not looking forward to being introduced to the crown prince. She had heard nothing good about him at all, and the King was a lecherous, gluttonous drunk from all they had heard. He was less concerned with governing the realm than he was with who warmed his bed at night. She hoped the prince did not take after his father in this regard, but then he did not seem to have much of his father in him at all, according to their reports.

"So, his cruelty and whining must come from his mother, the lioness of Lannister," She said to
herself. 'I hope being queen is worth having to have his hands on me.' She cringed at the thought.

"What is it?" Her grandmother asked.

"I was thinking of the crown prince and how we will have to, well-" She said hesitantly.

"Ah, say no more, child. It was daunting even for me, the first time," Olenna answered kindly. "It will hurt, but only at first. It need only be as many times as it takes to put a babe in your belly, and then you can make whatever excuses you can think of to dissuade the prince. Make them as unpleasant as possible and this flowery fool will avoid you like the pox."

She laughed at that but it did little to dispel her discomfort at the thought of laying with the prince. She had yet to lay eyes on the boy who was to be her husband and she already wished for him never to touch her. A part of her still hoped that she would find a better husband; one who would set her desire alight and treat her kindly and lovingly. Though such a man does not exist in this realm, if her grandmother was correct.

'And she usually is,' She thought, sighing internally.

"What are the words of House Stark?" Olenna suddenly shot at her granddaughter.

She had been doing this ever since her meeting with the mysterious man Margaery had stumbled upon. Sometimes she would ask her during a conversation or spring a question on her like she did now.

"Winter is Coming," She immediately answered.

She was still none the wiser as to why her grandmother wanted her to learn about the North and House Stark, but she had increased her knowledge of the largest of the Seven Kingdoms and its denizens. She was glad she had been commanded to do so now, the North sounded fascinating if its history was anything to go by.

"Which House resides closest to the Wall?"

"House Umber of Last Hearth."

"And White Harbour is ruled by?"

"House Manderly of New Castle." She shot back just as fast as her grandmother asked.

Olenna nodded, satisfied for now.

"Given how close the King is to his new Hand, we should expect to be in his presence more often than not. Knowing of his homeland can only serve to ingratiate us with him. Perhaps enough to suggest a betrothal between your brother and his daughter."

She doubted a few facts about a land he knew better than any of them would increase the likelihood of that. If Lord Stark had turned down a royal betrothal for his daughter, it was not very likely he would accept one from House Tyrell.

'Perhaps they are planning to betroth her to a northern lord's son,' Margaery thought to herself. 'To further solidify their rule in the North.'

"I do not think he would accept Willas for his eldest daughter, grandmother. He might not have ventured south at all were it not for his position; perhaps he wishes to keep the rest of his family in
the North in all things, including marriages and alliances." Margaery said to Olenna.

"Then he is a bigger fool than I am already anticipating him to be," She replied haughtily. "And do not forget I raised your father, bumbling idiot if ever I saw one. No, my dear, this Stark fellow is going to see he will need all the allies he can get - once he learns how things work outside of his frozen home."

"Unless he proves to be a greater politician than we expect him to be."

"I highly doubt it, dear. It was his brother, Brandon, who was meant for the Lordship of Winterfell. While his brother was learning how to govern his kingdom, Lord Eddard was in the Vale chasing skirts and ale with our noble King Robert." Olenna said to her granddaughter. "The man was forced to accept his position after the deaths of his father and brother at the hands of the Mad King." Her voice adopted that note of disgust it always did when speaking of the last Targaryen monarch.

Margaery had only recently learned exactly how Lord Rickard and his heir Brandon were murdered by King Aerys. It was horrific and she could not blame Lord Eddard for joining his friend in rebellion. She was glad she did not have to grow up under the rule of such a man.

'Though perhaps I would be marrying a noble prince if I had,' She thought.

"He will try to act with his precious honour at first, but once he realises it is a weapon that can be used against him he'll see things our way. That is when we shall make our move, but we shall attempt to befriend him regardless; if only to get the measure of the man the King considers his brother more than those his own mother popped out." Olenna finished with a small smirk.

"We should make sure we are there to greet him," Margaery said. "Assuming we do in fact arrive before he does, of course. If we are there the first time he takes note of Robert's court then he will see us as a permanent fixture, instead of just a visiting family."

"That is wise, my dear. Each day I grow ever more thankful that there is so little of your father in you," Olenna said proudly as she reached forward and placed a hand on Margaery's cheek. "You are a beautiful woman as a queen should be, more than that, you are clever as very few men would expect a queen consort to be. The Stags and their Lion bootlickers will not know what hit them."

She gave a small, triumphant laugh as she finished speaking and relaxed back into her seat.

'I will do my best to make you proud, grandmother,' She swore to herself. 'I will be the queen the people deserve and the granddaughter you raised me to be. Even if I have to suffer a malignant whelp for a husband to do it.'

That still did not stop her from wishing she could marry anyone but the crown prince.

King's Landing was unlike any place she had ever seen before - in the worst way possible.

True, she had never seen a battlefield after the chaos of war had ripped through it, but this place was foul.

She could smell it before she could see it. The Red Keep and The Great Sept of Baelor stuck out instantly on their respective hills, but the stench was the most prominent part about it.

How could this be the capital of the Seven Kingdoms? How could the King rule from such a place?

How could they expect anyone to live in such squalor?
As their carriage trundled through the streets she got her first glimpse of what life was like for the smallfolk in the capital. Not one of them looked to be whole and healthy. Their clothes were ragged and would provide little protection once the cold weather came. Their faces were gaunt and dirty and their eyes told her just how miserable they were even without all the other indicators. Her heart almost shattered when she saw a woman sat against a wall of what she assumed was a bakers shop with a babe held close to her - it was this sight that caused her to order the wheelhouse to a stop.

"What are you doing, girl? Have you lost all sense?" Her grandmother asked with a shocked expression.

"If I am to be queen of these people, I cannot pass by them in luxury while they suffer in such conditions." She replied in a firm voice she never really used with Olenna.

Without further ado, she opened the door to the wheelhouse and accepted the helping hand of one of their guards. She made her way over to one of their many carts and found the one she was looking for. Opening the small chest that contained enough gold to feed the entire street, she took out some gold dragons and silver stags and proceeded to make her way to the woman with the babe, handing out silver to the little children and gold to the families that were in her path.

Before she reached the woman and her babe a small crowd began to form around her, which caused her guards to nervously reach for their swords and warn the smallfolk to come no closer. She was worried, truth be told, and she felt vulnerable despite her guards, but thoughts of how vulnerable mothers and their children must feel in this place without the protection she had spurred her on.

"Hello, there," She spoke to the woman as she finally reached her. "Might I ask your name?"

The woman merely looked at her with scared eyes, this close she could see the bruises on her face that were evidence of a recent beating. The red marks she could see on her neck and disappearing into her dirty clothes spoke of other forms of abuse.

"Do not be afraid," She made every effort to make her voice as soothing as possible. "You are in no trouble, I merely wish to know your name and that of your babe." She finished with one of her dazzling smiles.

This seemed to work as the woman finally spoke to her.

"Senna, m'lady," She said with a tremble before looking down at her babe. "And this here is Flynn, m'lady." Her eyes were fixed on the ground as she finished speaking, as if she were expecting to be reprimanded for addressing someone of her station.

"Well, it is lovely to meet you, Senna. And you, little Flynn," She cooed at the babe whilst caressing his little cheek, he responded with a gummy smile and a gurgle which caused her heart to leap with joy. "You are a handsome little boy, aren't you?"

Senna looked shocked as she spoke to her son. Margaery assumed most nobles would have just hurried past them without a second glance, but she was not most nobles. She would not see people suffer if she could do something to prevent it.

'As queen I could do something to prevent it,' She said to herself, her resolve to achieve her goal growing ever stronger.

"Here, Senna, take this for you and your little one," Margaery said to her as she handed a small purse containing a gold dragon and several silver stags. "For food, clothing and whatever else you
have need of - and be sure to spend a little on what you want, rather than need." She finished with a playful wink.

Senna's hands were shaking as she accepted the purse, it was clear that she was waiting for Margaery to tell her of some catch, but that was not who she was.

"You owe me nothing for this, Senna," She said before the woman could speak. "I intend to help as many as I can whilst I am in this city, starting with you and this little treasure," She smiled once more at the bundle that was nestled in Senna's arms. "I will be sure to visit as often as I am able to, mind you keep yourself safe, yes?"

That was when the worry and fear spread freely across her face. Her eyes were darting about the crowd fitfully as if scanning for potential predators until she finally found her voice.

"M'lady, there is a man here and he-" She gulped and her voice faltered as she continued. "He comes by and takes what he will, if he knew I had th-this then he would cut my throat to claim it-" She made to hand the purse back to Margaery. "I'm truly thankful, m'lady, I am but it would only single me out as a mark."

Margaery had not been expecting her to say that. As she heard the words fall from Senna's battered lips, one of her rare flashes of anger welled up in her. The thought of someone harming an innocent mother and leaving a babe orphaned for a small purse of coins was barbaric and unforgivable.

"Senna, has this man broken any of the king's laws that you know of?" She whispered to her so no one else could hear. "Anything that the gold cloaks would haul him away for?"

She had her answer as soon as she saw the fear renewed upon her face as she nodded ever so slightly.

"What did he do?"

"H-he forces himself on m-me and others, m'lady." Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke and indicated her bruised face. "It was him what did this to me, m'lady, and not two moons ago he got one girl so bad she can't see no more, m'lady." She could not stop herself now she finally had someone to listen to her problems. "It's not just women, m'lady, he abuses those who can't fight back and takes what he will and calls it payment for his protection. There are none here who would be sorry to see the gold cloaks take him - but they only come to these parts twice a month at most."

She knew her next move could cause the crowd to turn violent towards her and her guards, but she had a chance to make a solid impression on the smallfolk and to rid this innocent woman and others of a blight on their already miserable lives. She quickly took stock of her guards, counting near twenty in her immediate vicinity, all of them armed and well-trained. She made her mind up and turned back to Senna.

"Is this man here? Can you see him in the crowd, Senna? Look with your eyes and blink three times if you see him."

Her eyes did not need to rove the crowd as she had instantly fixed them on a position over a Margaery's left shoulder and blinked thrice.

She turned her head ever so slightly to peer into the crowd, her eyes hidden by the curtain of her hair. She saw a dirty man who looked frightening enough compared to the miserable, defeated men surrounding him. He had a distinctive scar over his right eye that reached the top of his lips.

"Is it the man with the scar on his face, Senna?" She asked and when Senna nodded in reply,
Margaery stood and turned toward her guard, gesturing for his water skin.

"Don't look straight away; there is a man just over my right shoulder in the crowd. He has a scar over his right eye," She said to the guard as he handed her his water skin. "When I kneel down to offer this water to the woman, round up the other men and seize him. He is a rapist and has caused enough misery in these people's lives. We will take him and hand him over to the gold cloaks. Do you understand?"

The guard nodded and so Margaery turned back to Senna and offered her the water skin.

"It is all going to be all right, Senna," She said with a reassuring smile to the young mother.

Just as she finished speaking her guards moved towards the scarred man and seized him. They searched his person and came away with two small knives. The man protested but did not do anything to attack the men seizing him.

'No doubt he not used to being on the receiving end of someone else's hands,' She thought to herself. 'He is no fighter when faced with trained men who do not cower.'

She turned back to Senna as the man was hauled off ahead of them to be left with the nearest patrol of gold cloaks they found. She would ensure he is not allowed to talk or bribe his way out of meeting the justice he deserves - whatever the King decides that should be.

She smiled once more at Senna and said her farewells, promising to visit her as soon as she is able. The woman was crying with what she assumed was relief and gratitude as she walked back to the wheelhouse. The entire crowd was watching her with something akin to respect and awe, so she took advantage of the opportunity to fully establish herself.

"My name is Margery of House Tyrell. I am here in the capital to visit with the King and his family," She said in the loud, regal voice she had been taught to use during her future duties. "The man my guards have detained is a rapist and, if my friend speaks true, someone who has taken advantage of the poor lot most have drawn in life. They will be handing him over to the men charged with keeping the King's peace and from there he will be met with whatever justice the King judges to be fair." She noticed a few members of the crowd looked uneasy at her words, and so she decided to add a finishing touch. "I intend to do my best to help each and everyone of you in this city. And rooting out those who harm you in your hour of need is only the first of many changes I intend to make."

She flashed one of her smiles at the crowd and rejoined her grandmother in the wheelhouse.

Once they were moving again she allowed herself to relax and exhale the breath she had been holding. She had been more scared than she had wanted to admit to herself out there, at the mercy of what could have been a mob. Still, she had made an impression, she was sure of it.

"I admire your bravery, my dear, and what you did will ensure we can make a good standing for ourselves with the smallfolk," Her grandmother said. "Be more cautious in the future. It would only take one knife to end you in a crowd as dense as that."

"I know, grandmother, but I could not stand the thought of just riding past while so many were starving and suffering," She responded with her voice still shaky. "I will not be the kind of queen who smiles and waves from the top of the castle steps, but covers my face to avoid the smell and eyes of my people when amongst them. Those people need to know they have someone to turn to. It will only do our image good when I am announced as the future queen."
'And it will lay the groundwork for the work I intend to do while I am in this cesspit,' She finished to herself.

Grandmother's face was torn between exasperation and pride as she observed her precious Rose.

"You will be queen, my dear," She vowed more strongly than she ever had before. "No matter what it takes, you will have that crown."

As disappointing as the capital of the Seven Kingdoms had been, it was nothing compared to the King and the royal family.

They had heard all about Robert's gluttony and love of wine, but seeing the result of it in person was something else. He greeted her and Olenna cordially enough, though his eyes always trailed down her neckline and as soon as the introductions were out of the way he wasted no time in refilling his goblet - or rather barking at a timid boy to refill it for him.

'This is the King of the Seven Kingdoms?' She thought. 'This man who is indulging night and day whilst his people starve outside his home?'

She was ashamed to call such a man her king, just as she knew she would be ashamed to call the crown prince her husband upon meeting him. He was handsome enough, that much was true, but his demeanour was not befitting that of the heir to the Seven Kingdoms. When his father had refused to allow him to deliver justice to the rapist Margaery had had detained, he pouted and sulked and looked to his mother - who seemed inclined to argue with the King to see her son's will done.

The queen was also a disappointment to her. Within a minute of meeting her Margaery knew the kind of queen she would not allow herself to be. Like the King she had her hands around a glass of wine as soon as they had greeted their guests. She did not speak until her son appealed to her to change the King's mind.

"They get a choice, Cersei," The King all but roared at his wife. "Either they lose their cock to the knife here, or they lose their cock to the cold at the Wall."

He laughed loudly at his own words, and it annoyed her slightly to see her father chortling along with him.

She was glad the man who had tormented Senna and others would be facing justice, but she was also glad that he would not be subjected to the prince's form of justice. It was clear to her that this would have been nothing short of torture and while she cannot pretend to care for a rapist, she would not condemn anyone to suffering dressed up as justice.

'The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword,' She said to herself. 'It is the way they deliver justice in the North.'

Looking at the King she could believe that he would take a man's head, and would be out of breath for the rest of the week after swinging the sword. Joffrey would not be the man to swing the sword, but she could tell he would be more than happy to torment a condemned criminal.

'This man might not have become what he is if the King had done his duty to the realm he rules,' Margaery mused. 'When I am queen, justice will be delivered swift and sure. No matter their crimes, the only agony a condemned man should feel is knowing he is condemned.'

The meeting had gone well enough in that she was presented to the King and his heir, but now she
was sat with her grandmother and eldest brother she could at last speak her mind - as much as it was safe to do so in the Red Keep, of course.

"What do you think to them, grandmother?" She asked in a neutral tone.

"Woefully incompetent. They all act like children in one way or another, it is a wonder the realm still exists. No doubt that is thanks to the former Hand of the King. Let us hope this new one is up to the task," Olenna replied. "He has five children of his own so at least he will have experience dealing with tantrums."

Willas cleared his throat as grandmother finished. She nodded at him to speak.

"Whilst father and I were attempting to negotiate terms of a new agreement with the Reach, we learned that the crown owes a substantial debt to House Lannister - millions, in fact," He said to them with his eyes fixed on the door. "And there are other creditors, including the Iron Bank of Braavos. We have not discovered the sum of that particular debt, though."

Grandmother retreated deep into her thoughts as Willas ended his report. So Margaery decided to use the silence to ask her brother some questions of her own.

"What is your opinion of the crown prince, brother?"

"Honestly he is a brat, Marge," Willas said bluntly. "I thought he would be more likeable once he had recovered from the journey, but no. He treats all those beneath him as though they are his playthings. Including me and my leg." He trailed off with a bitter note in his voice.

The thought of the boy she would call her husband mocking her brother made her wish it was he who had the crippled leg. She doubted Joffrey would ever enter the lists or melee events at a tourney.

'His mother would not allow it,' She thought to herself with a small amount of amusement. 'She indulges his every whim that much is clear. She would never allow him to put himself at risk, though. Not even in a tourney where everyone would let him win.'

"What of the King?"

"He seems good enough for a friend, but not exactly the kind of man you would expect to be a king. He spent most of the audiences father and I had with him talking of women he had bedded, and men he had killed." Willas said with distaste. "You would think the King would forgo such indulgences with the crown in such debt, but no. In the short amount of time we have been here, the King has attempted to have several tourneys arranged for whatever excuse he can think of; luckily the Master of Coin has managed to talk him out of such follies - for now."

So, the King would rather increase the crown's debt to satiate his own wants rather than meeting the needs of his people.

'Why in the hells did they choose such a man to become king all those years ago?' She wondered.

"Why must you wait for the new Hand to arrive before agreeing to a new deal, brother? Surely the Master of Coin would be the most informed to finalise such an arrangement?"

"Baelish, the Master of Coin, is skilled enough with numbers it is true," Willas replied with a small smirk. "But the King and the council trust him about as far as they could throw him. It was mainly the Master of Whisperers who suggested waiting for Lord Stark to arrive before finalising any matters."
She was about to reply but grandmother had finally left her ever-plotting mind and took over the conversation.

"We are all eager to meet this new Hand, my dears," She said. "We shall propose an arrangement between the Reach and the North as well; they will be in sore need of grain when winter is upon the realm. Counting the King's wolf pup as a friend will only improve our standing with Robert."

"Do you still intend to propose a marriage alliance between us and House Stark?" Margaery asked.

"I do, my dear, but we shall wait until the man has managed to get the measure of your brother here," She replied with a nod to Willas.

"What makes you think he will accept such a betrothal? Surely the man who thought the future Lord of the Seven Kingdoms was not good enough for his daughter would not allow her to be married off to-" He paused and glanced at his lame leg. "Well, someone like me."

Margaery felt a surge of sympathy and pain for her brother as he said these words. He was a kind man, and would make a good husband for any woman. Olenna, however, must have felt only annoyance at her grandson's words.

"Do you think Lord Stark refused the betrothal because the prince was crippled? No. He refused it because he saw what we have all now seen - the prince is a little beast who would torment a lady instead of loving her. When Lord Stark takes note of your kindness and intellect, he may yet throw his precious daughter at our feet. You put too much stock in your crippled leg and lose sight of what actually matters." She finished not unkindly.

Willas gave no response, no doubt he was too stunned to speak. It was not very often the Queen of Thorns complemented anyone - even her family.

"So, what is the plan?" Margaery asked her grandmother. "You were quiet for a short while. What were you thinking of?"

Olenna looked over her grandchildren and must have decided they were worthy of hearing her thoughts as she began to speak.

"I believe the crown's debt to the Iron Bank can work in our favour should," She paused to consider her words, looking around at the room that only they occupied. "Should a new situation arise. Meanwhile, the debt to the Lannisters can also play in our favour if the rumours about their gold mines are true."

"What rumours?" Willas asked quickly.

"They are dry," Olenna replied with a gleeful smirk. "According to a gentleman I had an appointment with at Highgarden, there has been no gold mined from the Rock and its mines in nearly two years."

Willas opened his mouth to ask something, but then closed it as a thoughtful look crossed his face. He spoke once he had apparently put all of the pieces together.

"Then they themselves must have been borrowing funds to loan the crown in turn," He said excitedly. "Tywin Lannister would not admit to his wealth being depleted and would take any risk to keep the reputation of his House secure. This is brilliant!"

Margaery failed to see how a Great House, even one as loathed as the Lannisters, fading into poverty was a thing to be gleeful about.
'The people they rule over in the Westerlands will be the first to suffer,' She thought sadly. 'So that the nobles may keep their comforts.'

"I do not understand, how does this work in our favour?" She asked.

Both Willas and grandmother exchanged the same knowing smile before Olenna responded to her question.

"It works in our favour because we are an incredibly wealthy House, with no outstanding debts. The crown and the Lannisters could both be in debt to the Iron Bank - and they never forget to collect on their agreements," Her tone only grew more joyous as she continued. "Should certain events come to pass, then they would already be at a severe disadvantage because they would lack the funds to field a proper force - unless they all but admit their financial situation and lose some of the respect the Lions have always enjoyed. It would be the fear of ending up like the Reynes that would keep their vassals in line, and that would only last until a more powerful overlord enters the game."

Margaery still did not fully understand, but decided not to push the issue any further. She already had a lot to think over.

"When are we to offer the crown prince my hand?"

Her grandmother's smile only grew as she looked at Margaery.

"Why, it all depends on when Lord Stark arrives, my dear," She answered. "Yes, that man will find himself quite popular once he reaches the capital. He will be like a fish out of water." She gave one of her small chuckles as she finished.

"Why must we wait for this Northern lord before proposing a marriage alliance and a new trade deal?" She wondered. 'This must have something to do with the note grandmother received in Highgarden - and that mysterious man.'

She was weary of all of this and she had only been in the capital a day. Is this what she really wanted? Could she really play this game for the rest of her life? Would she rather just head back to Highgarden and marry the first lord her father found worthy of her?

She thought she would, but then the image of Senna and her babe cowering in fear of their tormentor came into her mind.

'I would be abandoning them to worse men than I had saved them from today. I have given them hope, and leaving now will only make their suffering worse than before they had the little hope I burdened them with.' She thought to herself. 'No, I will play this game and handle this royal brat if it means helping those poor wretches in the streets below. I will be the Queen that Cersei should have been. I will be the kind of Queen that they remember for thousands of years after my death.'

And with her promised renewed and her resolve even stronger, she settled back and listened to her plotting brother and grandmother, securing this small moment of peace before she must fully enter the game.

Chapter End Notes
So, the whole arrest situation might seem OOC for Margaery but I wanted to establish her as not only willing to give food and comfort to the less fortunate, but also justice. I felt like I was writing Margaery in her element as she was in the crowd and helping those in need, and decided to throw in the detainment of Senna's rapist whilst writing that scene.

This is the longest chapter I have written (I think) and most of it is plotting - as I feel any chapter with the Queen of Thorns featured in so heavily would be. The next few Margaery chapters will see her really come into her own in the great game - especially once she becomes familiar with all of the other major players!

Updates may slow down for a little while from now on, this is the last of the bulk chapters I had planned out and I want to have a few written up before posting the next! :)


His entire life had been a lie until mere weeks ago.

The man he had known as his father was his uncle. The aunt he had never met was the mother he had longed to know all his days. His father was the man the North reviled for a crime he had never committed. One of his grandfathers murdered the other and his uncle. It was all so much to take in.

Not only had he learned that he was not the bastard son of Eddard Stark, he learned that he was not a bastard at all. The trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. He was as much royalty as the surviving children of the Mad King were.

And finally, the Old Gods themselves had spoken with him. They confirmed the words his uncle had used to send Jon's mind into chaos. With all that has been revealed to him he felt his mind would snap with the strain of it all.

And then he turned when he heard the clearing of a throat, and was confronted by a woman kneeling before him.

At first he thought it was Lady Catelyn because of the red hair, on her knee to plead once more for forgiveness that he was not sure he could give, but then she spoke and his mind felt ever closer to snapping.

'Why is she kneeling to me?' He thought to himself. 'Bastards are not knelt to.'

_You are no bastard, as you have so recently learned. Eddard Stark told you there would be another to reveal truths to you. Here she is._

It was the sobering effect of hearing his Gods once more that allowed him to finally find his tongue.

"Do not kneel to me, please," He said to the woman. "I know why you are here, but I am no lord to be knelt to."

The woman, Melisandre, finally rose with an unreadable expression on her face.

"I know not what you have been through, only that your Gods have said that much has been revealed to you," Melisandre said in a deferential voice. "I fear I may only add to this burden, but it must be done as the Lord wills it. There is a great threat rising in this land that, if left unchecked, will erase all light and life."

Her words had caused his mind to remember that horror he had seen in his visions; the monster with an icy crown that seemed to be trapping the souls of others in that boundless void. The Gods had refused to elaborate on it, and he suspected his uncle knew what it was but all he said was that it was not his place to tell him. That the role was meant for another - who must be the woman standing just feet away from him.

All hopes that what he had seen had merely been a figment of his fractured mind gone, he steeled himself and spoke to the woman.
"This is about what I saw during my audience with the Gods," He gestured to the Heart Tree as he spoke. "That creature with an icy crown and blue eyes in the void."

"You have seen it?" Melisandre asked shocked.

"I-I do not know how, but I lingered too long in the vision and it," He struggled to find the right word to describe the sensation he remembered. "It was almost like it was pulling me into the void by my entire being. It was all blackness and it was staring at me and walking towards me, if I hadn't repelled it I doubt I would be here now."

He knew what he was saying would be viewed as the ravings of a madman were he to say it to anyone else, but this woman was clearly no ordinary person. He could feel, without understanding how, a power radiating from her. It felt familiar to him, almost soothing.

'I must be careful to not allow it to change me,' He reminded himself. 'I may not be the son of the Stark I was raised by, but I am still a Stark and we are not vain.'

'Deciding to get this over with as quickly as possible, he pressed the silent woman to once again find her voice.

"What is it? And what does any of it have to do with me?" He asked.

That was something he had been wondering about ever since the initial shock of his parentage had worn off - though it was still far from fitting comfortably in his new reality. Even if he was a prince why was he being shown such things? Were the prince and princess - his aunt and uncle - across the Narrow Sea being subjected to the same visions? Did they know about their surviving nephew?

His musings were interrupted by Melisandre.

"It is the champion of the Great Other. You may know it better as The Night King, yes," She spoke as he recoiled in shock and horror. "The legends are true. The evil was never vanquished entirely - it was only forced to slumber. Now it wakes, if it has not already done so." Her voice took on a hint of fear as she continued. "Steps were taken long ago to ensure the champion would never reach the realm of men again. The Wall holds it at bay from crossing the land, and the barrier that it spreads prevents it from crossing the sea. There were other restraints as well; it was stripped of most of its powers, imprisoned by magic beyond even my knowledge. It-"

He had heard too much to allow her to continue without attempting to make sense of things.
"I do not understand what any of this has to do with me," He could hear the whine in his voice but at the moment he did not care. "How can it remain? It was defeated thousands of years ago, the whole of the North knows that."

_She speaks true, child. Do not allow the folly of your ancestors to cloud your sight. There is too much at stake for your doubt and denial. Of all living men and women, you cannot afford to let such feelings take root within you._

"The Great Other sustains its champion, just as R'hllor, the Lord of Light, will sustain you," Melisandre said mysteriously. "You are the Lord's champion, it is your destiny to drive back the darkness as The Last Hero did millennia ago. And that is why I have come here. I will serve you as best as I can to help you succeed."

None of this was making any sense to Jon. Why was all of this happening now? He could not deny what he saw in the God's realm, not without denying the truth of his birth which he knew to be true - regardless of how unreal it still felt.

Now this woman was here speaking of a long dead figure from history as though it were still alive. And she had just said that he was the one meant to drive it back. How can any of this be real?

His grip tightened on Ghost's fur in an attempt to prevent himself from bolting from the Godswood. This place used to be his sanctuary of sorts; he could always escape the looks and feelings of exclusion here. Now it was only the place where his life was continually disrupted time and again. He had to make sense of this.

"How do you know all of this? Have the Gods spoken with you as they did with me?"

"They have, but only when I first stepped into this clearing," She answered. "My own God, the Lord of Light, has been guiding me to this moment for many years. I do not understand all of it but I do know that it is your destiny and your duty to ensure the world does not fall to this evil."

It seemed his mind still had much to endure before it could be allowed to rest and make sense of all of this. Deciding it best to get it all out as soon as possible, so that it might be dealt with sooner, he buried the growing emotion deep within him to focus on the task at hand.

It was that word, _duty_, that had stirred him. All his life he thought the greatest duty he would have would be as a ranger at the Wall, or serving Robb in whatever way he was allowed to when he was the Lord of Winterfell. Now, he was being told that his duty was to help save the entire realm of men? A part of him was ecstatic at the opportunity to prove himself a hero but mostly he was terrified.

'Why would this god choose me?' He wondered. 'I may not be a bastard for true, but there is nothing special about me.'

_How many times must your soul be wrung out before you accept the truth? You were denied your true self in order to keep you safe, yet now it is you who is attempting to shut the truth out. As much as you are suffering now because of it all, the living world will suffer much more if you cannot see past what you have allowed to form in your heart. None in this realm see you as a bastard more than you do._

Though their words were as soft and soothing as they had always been, he nevertheless felt as if he had just been chastised - by the Gods no less. It was not an experience he ever thought he would know so directly.
"How am I to do this? To stop the Night King-" He could not believe he was saying such things. "Or whatever that thing was? I am barely a man grown."

"I do not know how it can be done yet, my lord," Melisandre replied with uncertainty. "The Lord of Light has not shown me the means to destroy the champion of his greatest enemy. All I know is that you are the one to lead this world through the Long Night - but you will not be alone in this, my lord."

Her words did little to ease the maelstrom of emotion within him, but he kept it down and focused on getting as much information as he needed. He would make sense of what he could later when he would not be disturbed.

"What am I to do if your Lord of Light has not revealed the way forward to you? My own Gods refused to speak of this Night King at all."

"Prepare, my lord. This battle may not happen for many years and you should use that time to gather allies, resources and knowledge," Her voice became more passionate as she continued to speak. "As I said, I will serve you to the best of my ability. You are the Prince Who Was Promised and it seems your own Gods have chosen you as well as mine own."

He blanched at her words. How many people knew the truth of his birth besides himself? He knew that most of the realm was ignorant but just how many others knew the truth? The truth that his uncle would not have told him at all, were it not for the God's intervention.

"How do you know about that? Did my uncle tell you before he left?" He asked her, not even attempting to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"I have never met your uncle, my lord," She answered, clearly confused. "As for how I know who you are, the Lord of Light has made it known to all those who serve him that The Last Hero would be reborn to defeat the forces of the Great Other. That is you, my lord. As outlandish as it may seem, it is the truth."

"And you truly believe I am this 'Prince' who will do all of this? Just because I am a Targaryen?" He demanded. "There is another Targaryen prince across the Narrow Sea. How do you know it is not him?"

He had expected her to launch into a religious tirade, to defend a core belief of her faith. He was not expecting the look of utter confusion to fill her features. He certainly was not expecting her to close the distance between them so quickly he could scarcely follow her movements.

Her hands were on each side of his face and her grip was a lot stronger than he was expecting. He was sure she could easily snap his neck like a twig if she chose to and was thankful for the snarling direwolf that was at his side - not that it did anything to deter this woman.

"Who are you?" She asked as she gazed into his eyes, red on grey. He could not look away.

"I thought you knew?" He whispered. He did not like how her eyes seemed to see right into his being - it reminded him a little of that force that had seized him in the God's realm. "You called me a prince. You already know who I am."

She released his face and stepped back a few paces. Her face was once more a mask of detached calm but her eyes continued to blaze with hidden emotion as she looked at him expectantly.

"This is one of the truths that have been revealed to you, isn't it? Who are you?" She asked again with a little more force.
He did not want to say it out loud. He had made every effort to not give voice to it ever since he had learned of it. To say it out loud would make it real to him and there could be no more holding back the tide that threatened to overwhelm him since that night.

Looking at the woman before him, he knew he could not keep his silence anymore - and so he spoke the words that broke him just that little bit more.

"My father, at least the man I called father all my days, named me Jon. Jon Snow." He could hear the strain in his voice. "But he is not my father and I am not a Snow. I do not know what my true name is, if I even have one but as far as I know, I am-" He had to stop to take a deep breath and to force himself to say the words. "My name is Jon Targaryen."

As soon as he allowed the words to pass his lips he felt yet another change fall over him. It took him a few moments to realise what it was: relief. He did not feel weighed down by a secret he must keep for the peace of the realm and the safety of his family. He did not feel anywhere close to comfortable but he did feel considerably less conflicted.

He could not help but let loose a sigh as some of the crushing weight was lifted from his heart. Melisandre was still looking at him with such intensity he felt uncomfortable, which was not something he felt from the stares of others anymore. Not since the Godswood had come alive.

_We have always been here, child. Our songs have always filled the silence of the world. It was that you finally started to listen that changed within the realm. What you have heard since has not been easy, we know, but now you are closer to understanding just why you must face the truth and all it brings. If this world is to see another era then you must accept who you are before it is too late._

'I am trying,' He said to the Gods. 'Truly, I am. I just cannot comprehend all of this. I start as a bastard, then I was a prince and now I am supposed to save the world of men? How am I to bear all of this?'

_Not alone._

As the Gods replied with just those two words, he felt the breeze ripple through the Godswood, bringing with it a scent that soothed every part of him. It was as if all that was good in the world was breathed into the air by the Gods. He did not know how a scent, even one as divine as this, was to help him fight a force as horrifying as what he had seen. Still, he revelled in the smell that his eager nose breathed in even as it started to fade from the breeze.

The soothing sensation he felt was enough for him to finally break the silence that had followed since he spoke his true name.

"How am I to prepare? No one will follow a bastard from the North. They won't believe this threat is real, even the lords of the North who believe it to be a true thing of the past," He asked the silent woman. "They will not want to believe such a horror is coming for them."

At last her expression changed from the intense, calculating look as she smiled for the first time. It was not the kind that put him at ease, it actually unsettled him even more.

"You have said it yourself, Jon Targaryen. You are no bastard but a prince," She said simply. "I assume your father was the Dragon Prince, Rhaegar Targaryen?"

He nodded, not wanting to speak yet another truth into the world with his own voice.

"And your mother?"
"Lyanna Stark. My uncle Eddard raised me as his bastard in order to protect me. She died-" His voice caught as he spoke. "She passed away shortly after birthing me."

"Then you are not just a prince but a king," She said as if it were that simple. "Who better to unite this land to face the forces of the Great Other?"

She clearly did not understand how things worked on this side of the Narrow Sea.

"It is not as simple as that. Robert Baratheon overthrew the Targaryens and claimed the throne by right of conquest. Any claim I would have had to the Iron Throne was invalidated after that."

Her smile did not slip as he spoke, if anything it grew as she contemplated her next words.

"Then you must take it back by the same right the Stag did all those years ago."

"And how am I supposed to do that?" He exclaimed. "I have no armies, no allies, no resources and no experience with battles and war. I can wield a blade, aye, but that will mean precious little if it is my sword against thousands."

He felt excited despite himself. Imagining his life as the King of the Seven Kingdoms gave him more joy than he cared to admit. Maybe it was growing up believing himself a bastard that left him giddy at the thought of such a high place in society. He knew what it truly was though: to prove himself more than what others assumed him to be. He tried not to let himself think too much on this because he spoke true; he had no armies and no way of acquiring them. True, his uncle would attempt to rally the North to his cause, but it would not be as simple as he believed it would be. Too many lost their loved ones in the rebellion to overthrow the Targaryens.

His royal imaginings were halted by Melisandre's reply.

"This is true. The Lord of Light fills the world with men for a purpose," She said reverently. "Some of those men will follow you in the wars to come - you need only find them. I will help you in this; I will help you find these soldiers, allies and men skilled in warfare. I have already found what will be your greatest ally. Follow me."

With that same smile fixed on her face, she turned on the spot and made for the exit. Knowing there was no other choice but to grin and bear this until he could be alone, he followed the woman to his supposed greatest ally. He could not help but fixate on the word she had used. Not 'who' but 'what' she had said.

_You will leave the bastard boy in this wood soon, though it will not be today. Prepare yourself for what is to come and trust in us. Trust in yourself, King._

He had walked the halls of Winterfell all of his life, familiar with almost every part of the ancient castle.

This was not how he felt as he walked slightly behind Melisandre. He did not know where she was leading him; not because he was unfamiliar with the hall he walked in but because he did not know her intent. She had said she was here to serve him but how is she to do that?

'How can any man defeat a creature that has lived for thousands of years?' He thought with no small amount of despair. 'They built the Wall to keep this creature at bay and even that was not enough. How am I supposed to stand against this thing?'

Nothing he had learned these past few weeks changed the simple fact that he was only a man, with
no experience at ruling nor commanding and little practical combat experience. He was skilled with a sword, a natural swordsman, Ser Rodrik had said often. How was this supposed to fight against a monster that was blessed by a god? Surely that is what this 'Great Other' was?

He decided to use this very question to break the silence that had fallen on them since leaving the Godswood.

"My lady, what is this Great Other?"

She looked at him with that same subtle expression of fear on her face, she seemed reluctant to speak of this evil and just when he thought she would ignore his question, she spoke.

"He is the opposite of the Lord of Light in all things," She answered. "Where the Lord makes life, the Great Other offers death. The Lord warms the hearts of men, the Great Other causes them to wither in eternal cold."

"But why do the Old Gods allow such a threat to rise?" He persisted. "Surely they hold the power to destroy this Great Other and The Night King? They are the Gods."

"They are not the only Gods, not anymore. There are many things we must discuss before this, my lord," She said as she stopped and indicated the door to one of the guest chambers. "In here."

She opened the door and bid Jon to follow. The heat hit him immediately, it reminded him of the hot pools in the Godswood but this was dry and uncomfortable. How could she stand to reside in such heat?

The source of the heat became apparent as he looked around the room. His breath failed him as he saw it.

The brazier was larger than any in Winterfell that he had seen, it was wrought with patterns of flames and stars and hands held in supplication. This was not what had drawn his eye, though. In the roaring flames of the brazier was an object that just barely fit inside it. He must be mistaken, the fire playing tricks on his mind but he had a feeling he was seeing the truth.

He turned to Melisandre who had been watching him with rapt attention ever since he laid eyes on the brazier.

"Is that a-" He swallowed, the heat and his shock making it difficult to speak. "A dragon egg? Truly?"

"It is as I said, my lord," She replied with that smile forming once more. "Your greatest ally in the night to come."

'Will the world ever make sense again?' He screamed in his mind. 'What the hells am I to do with a dragon egg?'

He would ask this of the woman whose sanity he was beginning to doubt, but he could not form any words at all.

He did not need to apparently, Melisandre must have known what he would have said and so she spoke.

"Much has been revealed to you, my lord, I understand the burden your mind and heart must be struggling with," She spoke with a hint of sympathy. "You must find a way to reconcile all you have learned with your life. This is a dragon egg, yes, but to you I sense it will be much more than
"How? Only the Targaryens could-" He stopped himself, remembering who he was.

"No, my lord. It is not your father's blood that will allow you to bond with the dragon that will hatch from this egg. Your Valyrian ancestry would do more to provoke the hatred of such a creature, in fact."

This was making less and less sense. Everyone in the Kingdoms knew that the Targaryens and their ilk alone could bond with dragons due to their blood.

'The same blood that runs through my veins,' He thought awestruck, just realising the impact such a simple truth could have.

"I do not-"

"You have the blood of Old Valyria in your veins. The blood of the people who twisted and enslaved the dragons to serve their own interests. I do not understand why, but I sense it is the blood of your mother that will allow you to bond with this dragon, the same blood that ran through the veins of the Kings of Winter," She interrupted him. "I have taken to call this particular species a primal dragon. It is free of the taint of Valyrian sorcery."

Sorcery. Yet another word he had heard many times in his life, though never in the seriousness of the situation he found himself in. Once again his mind was dancing on the edge of a precipice and he could not help but laugh at his present circumstances.

It was only a few weeks prior he believed himself the Bastard of Winterfell. Now, he was here with a follower of a foreign religion, a prince of the Seven Kingdoms and in front of an actual dragon egg. That was without considering the fact that the Old Gods had spoken with him, he had briefly entered their realm and seen a horror that was apparently his to banish.

'Perhaps I am already as mad as my grandfather,' He thought to himself.

Despite the laughter he could not stop from filling the room, the state of his mind was devoid of humour. Just as he felt as if he had made peace with the truth enough to tether himself to who he is - he was once more ripped from the warm of certainty. It was all too much to contend with. It had all been thrust upon him too soon, he had never really recovered from the first volley of truth that shattered his life.

He felt the warm hand on his chest and the sudden heat it sent through his body. It seemed to burn away the pain that was ravaging his soul in that moment, it was enough to stop the laughter instantly. As he became fully aware of his surroundings once more, he looked at the hand that was still held against his chest.

Melisandre had closed the distance between them once more and this time her expression was one of understanding. She dropped her hand from his chest but remained where she was.

"The minds of men are not meant for such burdens. Not even a mind like yours can withstand the onslaught you have been forced to endure without consequences, and yet you are still here," Her voice was firm but he could not help but feel soothed. "Yours is a terrible destiny even without all of the revelations, my lord. Yet I fear there are more to come before you are ready to stand against the champion of the Great Other."

"Why?" He asked, not even caring for how he sounded in that moment. "Why me?"
"Because the Lord has chosen you. Your own Gods have chosen you. Who are you to doubt the choices of the beings responsible for the world in which we reside?"

_You are our last hope in the night to come, child. We are sorry this burden must fall to you, but it is too late for anything to be changed now. You must accept who you are and what you are meant to do. Yours is to lead, to battle and to build. We have chosen you, as have others and as will many more - only if you choose to accept yourself for who you truly are._

The scent he had caught in the Godswood swam through his mind as the Gods finished speaking to him. It shocked him to realise just how normal their voices in his mind were becoming. Savouring the sweet smell that his mind was fixating on, he gathered himself and spoke to the woman charged with guiding him.

"I-I am sorry for my outburst, my lady," He answered with as much dignity as he could manage. "I am overwhelmed by all of this," He gestured to himself and then to the egg in the fire. "I cannot make sense of it all and now I know that there is so much resting on my shoulders, I-I cannot-"

He felt Ghost in his mind as it neared the edge once more; the presence his silent companion had in his soul was deeper than he could explain. It was as if the gentlest of breezes was clearing his mind of pain and confusion and he found himself able to focus.

'Thank you, Ghost,' He spoke to his companion.

He felt rather than heard the wolf’s reply in his mind, the calm washing over him and giving him the needed respite to continue. He was more grateful for his direwolf than ever in that moment.

Deciding to make the most of the presence of his comforting spectre, he allowed the calm to turn into determination as he once more addressed Melisandre.

"What would you have me do first? I know nothing of hatching dragon eggs, much less controlling them. My uncle is thousands of miles away and his bannermen will not follow me, nor can I speak of this to Robb. If you are here to serve me then do so and tell me how we begin."

She was quiet for a few moments after he had finishing speaking, he could sense she was a little shocked at his sudden change. She does not know about the connection he has with Ghost, then.

'At least there is something known only to the Gods and myself,’ He said to himself with a small measure of satisfaction.

"As I said, my lord, this is not the egg of a tainted dragon. I know how to hatch those, but this one I do not. I-" She paused to consider her next words. "I had hoped that you would know how to do such a thing, given that the Lord bade me find it for you."

"I assure you, my lady, I have no knowledge of such things."

She was quiet once more as she thought on his reply. It was clear she was almost at a loss herself, something he sensed she did not feel often.

"Then the Lord does not wish for you to hatch this dragon yet." She decided firmly. "Let us focus on the gathering of allies, my lord. You say your uncle’s forces will not fight for you nor his eldest son, are there none loyal to your other family that would rally to your side?"

His knowledge of the Houses of the south was not great. He enjoyed studying history, but learning the names and words and relations of the Houses outside of the North was something he struggled with almost as much as geography.
"I do not know which of their former bannermen would join me, if they would even believe me," Jon said carefully. "The Gods know I find it difficult to believe myself at times."

"What if you could prove you are who you say? Would they follow you then?"

"I do not know, my lady," He answered truthfully. "It was almost twenty years ago and many in the Seven Kingdoms are glad to see the Targaryens gone."

"Is there any proof of what you have learned? I fear the Gods testimony will not be enough for the hardened hearts of men."

"Yes!" He suddenly remembered what his uncle had said of the letters Howland Reed had with him. "The Lord of House Reed was there the day of my birth, and my uncle entrusted him with the documents proving my birth and legitimacy."

Thinking of these letters brought his mind back to the one his uncle had handed him before leaving. All he had said was that it was meant for his eyes only, that his mother had wrote it for him.

He could not bring himself to open it. He was afraid of what he might learn that would further shatter his world - despite how much he wanted to touch something he knew her hand had glided over.

Melisandre brought him back to the task at hand.

"Then you must summon him to bring all the proof he has. It may be enough to rally those still loyal to your family," She paused, her expression suggesting a thought had crossed her mind. "Dragonstone. The lords sworn to Dragonstone are mostly those who were loyal to the Targaryens. If any would pledge themselves to the dragons, it would be them. Perhaps that is where we should start."

"Lord Reed will not leave the Neck, I intend to travel there myself as soon as I feel ready to." He said. "I do not know these lords sworn to Dragonstone - I have never even left the North. There are only five others who know the truth of me in the realm, at least as far as I am aware."

Melisandre lapsed into silence yet again, and so he took the opportunity to examine the egg that was supposedly meant for him.

He had never seen a dragon's egg before so he did not know what to expect, but it certainly was not this. It was much larger than he thought it would be. It was also beautiful, and alluring. The pulsating purple and white veins seemed to match his own heartbeats.

He reached out his hand slowly to the top of the egg, which was the part that was likely to the be coldest. When his hand finally rested on the top of the egg he was surprised at how cold it was. It was as if he were touching cold steel, which made no sense given that the egg was immersed in a burning fire.

'Unless this is not a natural fire,' He thought. 'This could be some magic of this woman's God.'

He looked into the flames that were licking the bottom of the egg and he felt a familiar sensation wash over him.

He was seeing more than just flame, the egg and the bottom of the brazier. He could see flashes of the visions he had seen in the God's realm and flashes he had not seen.
There was what he assumed to be the Wall looming against the night sky. There was the Godswod they had just left, but it was also at night and then he saw what he assumed to be the Neck. Endless swamps and greenery giving way to a small castle that seemed to be floating.

'What is all this?' He thought to himself. 'Is this the dragon egg affecting the flames, or yet more evidence of my burgeoning madness?'

His fear of inheriting the madness of his father's family was prevented from growing as his Gods spoke to him once more.

You are far from mad, my champion. I allow all those who follow me the chance to witness truth in my flames, though few are able to comprehend what they see. You are different. I trust you can make sense of what I have just shown you?

It was not the voice of his Gods that had spoken to him. He knew it well enough by now; the voices of the Old Gods was a soft, melodic chorus that resonated within him. This voice was much more certain. It reminded him of the voice he had heard his uncle use often as the Lord of Winterfell. Full of authority and fairness, but making the force behind the words clear enough.

It was nowhere near as comforting as the Old Gods, but he knew it meant him no harm. So he thought on what he had seen.

'The Wall. The Godswod. The Neck.' He repeated in his mind. 'We were just in the Godswod, but day is still upon us. I have never been to the Wall nor the Neck. So then,' He felt strangely certain as he made sense of what he has seen. 'You are showing me the path, the start of the path at least. Where I must go first?'

Yes. I knew I chose well with you, my child. My servant, Melisandre, will guide you throughout your journey. Through her will I act, unless a more potent presence is required. Know this, my champion: your task is not an easy one, but with faith, strength and sense you will succeed and the darkness will be banished. Shred the last of your doubt here and now, so you will be ready to cast off the last vestiges of the shield that became your prison in the future. Do not fail me, my child.

With that the flames cleared and he felt that blazing presence retreat from his soul.

'Yet another voice to join my own in my mind,' He thought as he shook his head and turned back to Melisandre, who was still deep in thought.

"We must go to the Wall first, my lady." He said with a confidence that surprised him.

"The Wall? Why? How do you know this?" She asked.

"It seems the Old Gods are not the only ones who wish to speak with me," He answered slowly. "I saw the Wall in the flames, along with the Godswod at night and what I suspect is Greywater Watch. Your God then spoke to me and made me realise he was instructing me on how to begin."

Her mouth was agape and her eyes were almost as wide as he spoke. Wordlessly she once more approached him and touched his chest. That same warmth washed through him though it felt less intense now.

"H-he, the Lord of Light spoke with you?" Her voice was hoarse and trembling. "You heard his voice? Truly? It was not your own Gods?"

"I am certain, my lady. It felt less-" He paused to think of the right word. "Natural than the voices of the Old Gods. I mean no offence, my lady."
She apparently took none and the smile was once more gracing her face.

"You are truly the Lord's champion," She said in utter reverence. "You are the one who will save the world of the living. If the Lord wills us to go to the Wall, then we must make haste."

He nodded, though he did not know why he had to go to the edge of the Seven Kingdoms only to return to the Godswood.

Then he remembered, the maester of Castle Black who also happened to be his great-something uncle.

"I have a living relative on the Wall, two of them really, but one is from my father's side," He said to Melisandre. "Perhaps we must go there to learn how to hatch this." He gestured at the pitch black egg as he finished.

"When are we to depart, my lord?"

It felt strange to be the one to make the decisions, but he knew he must get used to this. He was still undecided about pressing his claim for the throne, if he had one at all with the Baratheons overthrowing his family. But he would do his duty, a duty given to him by an authority greater than any monarch. He would do his best to lead the living against this horror.

He still needed some time alone to process all he had learned, though. So, turning back to his new companion he informed her of his decision.

"There is still a few things that require my attention, and there is a Lannister in this castle. Though, he will not be here much longer." He spoke with that same confidence as he had before. "We shall head for the Wall once he is clear of Winterfell. I will use that time to sort through all I have learned. What say you, my lady?"

"I am yours to command, my lord. I shall watch the flames for any further guidance the Lord may grant us," She replied. "We should not tarry, however, time is not on our side no matter how far off the threat is."

He could only nod at her response. He was craving the solitude now that the calming sensation of Ghost was wearing off.

"I will take my leave, my lady. I must have some time to make sense of all this," He spoke as he made for the door. "We should be careful not to be seen together too often, my faith of the Old Gods is no secret in these walls."

"Of course, my lord, though do not forget that the Lord of Light is also your God," She answered with a small bow. "I am at your service, call on me when you have need, my lord."

He left the room then, rushing to his own chambers and entering the shared mind with Ghost to urge him to do the same. He could feel his control slipping as he made his way there to process even more truths that he had never even suspected. He had to keep ahead of this; he would do his duty and prove to the entire realm that even though he was a supposed bastard, he was still worthy enough to save the world of the living.

'None of that will matter if I have to suffer another revelation,' He thought to himself as he neared the door to his chambers. 'If Greyjoy's Drowned God introduces itself the next time I bathe, I do not know what I would do.'

It was to his intense relief that he saw Ghost waiting outside their chambers, he could already feel
the soothing presence in his mind strengthen. As he entered the room and threw himself down on his bed, he closed his eyes and guided his mind to fully merge with that of his wolf. Joined as one, he allowed himself to sink into the thoughts of Ghost to provide his much needed relief.

'Thank you, boy,' He said to their shared mind. 'And thank the Gods for putting you in my path that day.'

Chapter End Notes

This and the next Jon chapter are basically parts one and two of the same focal point. If this chapter does make it seem Jon's taking it all in his stride - it is not the case. The next POV of his will see even more of a cognitive/emotional struggle for him - but I won't drag out his mental anguish any longer than I feel it necessary, promise.

Thanks for reading and sorry for the longer than usual wait! I'm working on the upcoming chapters and want to get them all written up whilst doing them justice.
Ned's relief at the end of the long journey was marred by his destination.

He had hoped to never lay eyes on the capital, nor any place outside of the North, for the rest of his days. True, he knew that the possibility of being called to arms would have forced him to do so, but aside from that there was really no business he wanted with the other Six Kingdoms.

The procession to the Red Keep caused the memories to flood through his mind. He remembered the way the streets had been thrown into utter chaos; blood everywhere, smallfolk screaming for mercy, soliders with their blood up intent on taking what they wanted. He raised his banners to avenge his slain kin and to find his kidnapped sister - who was never kidnapped at all. He had not rallied the forces of the North to pillage the capital and put innocent folk to the sword. He certainly had not rode off to war with the murder of innocent babes in his heart.

It was this memory that stuck out most of all as he laid eyes on the entrance to the Red Keep and the King. The same man who laughed as the broken bodies of the Targaryen children were laid at his feet.

This was the first time he had seen Robert since realising the truth of his friend, and his own obsessive devotion to him that had caused him to fail his sister. He could not help but feel angry at the man before him, and deep shame for his own actions - but he was here and he had a part to play. Ned was no mummer but if it meant saving his family and the realm, he would dress in mock and parade for all the world to see his act.

"Your Grace," He said respectfully as he knelt before the King.

"Get up, Ned," Robert said loudly. "What the hell kept ya?"

"Apologies, Your Grace, the matter I delayed my travels for took longer than expected," He said as he stood and looked at the man who had been his greatest friend.

"Well, let's not stand about here," Robert snorted as he turned to enter the keep. "Come on then, let's get the pomp over with and then we can talk over some ale."

A small part of him had hoped to avoid the introductions and to simply make for his new chambers and rest. He should have known these southerners would not allow it.

"Where is the Queen, Your Grace?" He asked Robert as he noticed the woman was not in attendance.

"Hells if I know, Ned," He replied dismissively. "Now, introduce yourself to the rest of the Small Council and then come join me in my solar." He clapped Ned on the back as he made his way further into the keep, accompanied by his Kingsguard.

He turned to face the people assembled before him and offered a small smile. He made his way to the King's brother, Renly.

"Lord Renly, how do you fare?" He asked as he clasped hands with the man.
"Well enough, Lord Stark," Renly replied with one of his easy smiles. "I pray you can adjust to the heat of the capital, it must be stifling compared to the climate you are accustomed to."

"It does feel strange to not be wearing heavy furs, my lord. I am certain I will adapt quickly." He said as he moved to the man next to Renly.

He had never met this man before, but his appearance matched the descriptions his wife had given him.

"Lord Baelish, I presume?" He asked as he offered his hand to the man.

"Indeed, my lord," His voice was enough to cause Ned's skin to crawl as the man took his proffered hand. "I see your lovely wife has told you about me."

"Little enough, my lord, but she does remember your shared childhood at Riverrun," He did not wish to speak to Baelish more than he had to. "You are the Master of Coin, are you not?"

"I am honoured to hold that position, yes," He sounded almost sincere. "I have your foster father, Lord Arryn, to thank for it. May the Seven give him rest."

He nodded and gave one of his brief smiles as he moved to the man next to him.

He knew this man, though he also knew he must pretend otherwise. Convincingly.

"Lord Stark, it gladdens me to see you here in the capital under better circumstances," The Spider said before he could introduce himself. "I am certain your tenure as Hand will prove a boon to the realm, my lord."

"I thank you for your faith in me, Lord Varys," He said. "I pray I will not disappoint you nor the realm."

The Spider merely lowered his head in acknowledgement and so Ned moved once more to the person next to him. Yet another face from the rebellion, but this one did not cause him to remember anything but a feeling of impatience. He had been tasked with lifting the the siege of Storm's End before he could depart to find his sister; he had wondered many times if things would have been different had he arrived at the tower sooner.

"Lord Tyrell, I trust you are well?"

"I am indeed, Lord Hand," The man replied pompously with an exaggerated bow. "To be in the capital and witness the King in all his regal majesty, why it is a privilege I thought I would never have the chance to see. I have no doubt that the realm will indeed flourish under your wisdom and governance." He bowed once more as he finished.

Ned only dared to smile in reply, not trusting himself enough to open his mouth lest he laugh at the man's pomp. He moved along to the small woman who stood at his side.

"Lord Hand, I am Olenna Tyrell," The woman said as she offered him her hand to kiss. Her voice was surprisingly strong for one so old.

"Allow me to introduce my grandchildren, my lord," She turned to the young man and woman at her side. "This is my grandson, Willas, the heir to Highgarden. And my granddaughter, Margaery." The affection was clear in her voice as she said her granddaughter's name.
"My lord, my lady," Ned said as he dipped his head to each of the Tyrell children.

"Lord Stark, I trust your journey was not too hard?" The lad asked.

"It was thankfully uneventful, Lord Willas. I am relieved I do not have to spend another day riding, at last." He answered with a smile.

"I am pleased to meet you, Lord Stark," The young woman said with a curtsy. "Mine own journey here seemed to take forever, I can only imagine how it must have felt for one coming from the middle of the North."

Her words were measured and her voice was pleasant, the old Ned would not have noticed the casual mention of where his home is located in the North, but he was not that Stark anymore.

'She is playing the game,' He realised. 'And it seems her family and herself believe I am ignorant of it. This could work to my advantage.'

"Indeed, it was no short trip, my lady," He answered as politely as he could. "Have you ever been North, Lady Margaery?"

"I am afraid I have not had the pleasure, Lord Stark," She gave him a smile that would have rendered him breathless had he been a less disciplined man. "I find your homeland fascinating, however. The tales of the Kings of Winter most especially."

"Perhaps one day you may find the time to visit there, my lady. You would be most welcome at Winterfell."

"I am certain I shall take you up on that offer, Lord Hand," She said once more with a curtsy.

He stood back from the gathered nobles and allowed his face to relax just a little as he cleared his throat.

"Forgive me, my lords and ladies, I must take my leave and join the King," He said with a small bow to the assembled. "It would not do for my first act as Hand to be keeping him waiting."

"Lord Hand, perhaps you would join my family and myself for our evening meal?" Lord Tyrell asked before he could depart. "On the morrow, perhaps?"

'They must think me some simpleton,' He thought. 'Let them. I know what my Gods have shown me, and mine own role in ensuring it comes to pass.'

"That would be most welcome, Lord Tyrell, I thank you," He said respectfully. "Pray excuse me now, I really should not keep King Robert waiting."

He thanked his Gods for allowing him to see the truth for what it truly was, without it he would have been at a loss in this viper's nest. The Eddard Stark that had not received the guidance from the Old Gods would not have survived this place - but he will.

Not even an hour had passed since Robert left him to greet the members of the Small Council and the Tyrells, yet as he entered the King's solar it was clear Robert was already half drunk.

'Is this all he does?' Ned wondered. 'At Winterfell he was a guest and so his relaxed inhibitions were to be expected, this is not how he should act with the crown on his head.'
"Ned!" Robert all but slurred as his unfocused eyes found his new Hand. "About damn time! Pour yourself a drink and sit down."

"I am not thirsty, Your Grace," Ned declined respectfully. "Forgive me, it is also a little early in the day for me."

Robert only glowered but did not say anything else, so Ned took a seat opposite the man he would serve as Hand.

"I apologise once more for my late arrival, Your Grace," He began. "I could not, in good conscience, leave before ensuring my family would fare well in my absence."

"Are your children well, Ned?" Robert asked.

"Yes, thank you, Your Grace."

"Well, you're here now and there is much to be done," Robert said after a short silence. "I want to have a tourney to celebrate your appointment as Hand."

Ned had been expecting as much and knew that the King would not be deterred from this desire. All he could do was nod.

"And then there's this," Robert said in a dark tone as he threw a letter on the table before Ned. "Read it."

Ned unfurled the scroll as he was bid and read the words that were written in a hasty, untidy hand. He was not happy, to say the least, after reading the letter. This was mostly because of who wrote it rather than the information it contained.

"So, Jorah Mormont is in your service?" Ned asked his King shortly. "I sentenced him to death for selling men into slavery, Robert. What would the realm think of its King employing such a man?"

Robert reddened the way he always did when angered, but Ned would not alter his opinion on the matter. The Mormonts had always been a loyal vassal of his House, and the actions of their former Lord had sullied their hard earned reputation.

"That is what concerns you? Not the fact that the Targaryen whore has wed a Dothraki horsefucker?" Robert roared at him.

"All the Seven Kingdoms know the Dothraki would never cross the Narrow Sea, Robert. If Viserys Targaryen is expecting them to, then he is a fool," Ned said as calmly as he could. "Leave them be. If they land on our shores then we will throw them all back into the sea."

"They never should have lived this long, damn it!" Robert raged as he slammed a fist down onto the desk. "I should have gone to Dragonstone myself, storms be damned, I would have ensured the last of the dragonspawn were stamped out! Damn my brother for failing."

It was all Ned could do to not think of Jon as his friend shouted these words. Thoughts of his nephew sharing the fates of his true siblings were never far from his mind, and being in the presence of the man who had rejoiced in those fates allowed him to feel less guilty for hiding the truth from Jon for so long.

"They are no threat to your rule, Robert. You overthrew the Targaryens when you claimed the throne, they have no-"
"There are still those who call me 'The Usurper' Ned," Robert interrupted him loudly. "And we all know the reason there was no Great Council was because Jon claimed my blood gave me a right to the damn chair. If that is the truth of it, then the Beggar King and his whore sister have a stronger claim. Even Jon thought so."

That the King believed so was a shock to Ned, and so there was only one question he could ask in response to it. Though, he must be careful to not make it so obvious.

"There are more who are thankful to see the Targaryens gone than there are those who wish for a restoration," He said carefully, all the while observing the King's reaction. "Regardless of any claim they might have to the throne, you are the King. Aside from the Greyjoys, no other House has risen up against your reign."

Robert looked thoughtful at his words and Ned was relieved that he could think things through, at least. He waited for the King to reply; hoping that the response would contain the information he may yet need.

"They must be killed, Ned," He said flatly. "The eunuch picks up enough rumours and mutterings of wanting to see the dragons back on the throne, my reign will never truly be secure until their heads are on spikes above my city. And if any House wishes to join them, then I shall be only happy to oblige!" He finished with a small laugh that was all malice.

He could not save the prince and the princess the last time he was in the capital. There was no danger to them, in his honour-driven mind, he thought at the time; he had been horrified to see their broken bodies and even more so when his friend responded with glee.

'Not this time,' He vowed. 'I am the Hand of the King, and I will use whatever influence that might give me to save this prince and princess - they are Jon's kin, after all.'

He knew the King would not be talked out of this, his hatred for the Targaryens was no secret. Ned must work behind the scenes to keep them safe, just as he must to carry out the will of the Gods. They would not begrudge him using their wisdom to save the lives of two innocent people, surely.

He would still attempt to make Robert see sense.

"You cannot accuse those Houses you suspect without solid proof, Robert, it would only destabilise your reign and any Targaryen sympathisers would use that to recruit more to their cause. Focus your attention on matters that are of importance now, rather than those that may never come to pass. The Dothraki are not a gentle people; it is likely the Targaryens may not survive their time with them."

A truly unsettling gleam appeared in the King's eyes as he spoke these last words, joined almost immediately by that same gleeful expression he had worn years earlier.

"This, this, is why I needed you as my Hand, Ned," He said in a much calmer tone. "I may not need to have them killed at all if the Dothraki do the job for me! That way none of the dragon lovers that remain can blame me." He laughed heartily as he finished.

Ned did not miss that his former friend had not renounced his intent to have them killed, but at the most he has brought them some time. He was truly concerned for the two of them in such company as the Dothraki, but there was nothing he could do to help them with that situation.

"Perhaps we should discuss some of the problems in the Kingdoms whilst we are here, Your Grace," Ned ventured. "There are rumours of the Crown being in great debt to-"
"Piss on that, Ned!" Robert cut across him loudly. "And none of this 'Your Grace' pomp when it is just the two of us. Let's just drink and talk and then you can play with words with the rest of the Small Council on the morrow!" He laughed once more as he made to drain his mug of ale.

'What have you allowed yourself to become, Robert?' He thought sadly as he looked at the man who used to be his best friend.

It was a few hours later that Ned found himself in his new quarters in the Tower of the Hand. He had much to think over from his conversation with Robert.

The most pressing issue was that there were Targaryen loyalists in the realm. This would be a great advantage should Jon decide to press his claim. He was still unsure whether the Targaryens actually had any claim to the throne after being overthrown by the Baratheons.

'Robert's claim to the throne by right of conquest was solidified by his blood ties to the Targaryens,' Ned remembered. 'If the time comes when Jon does want to press his claim, that information might lend weight to his right to the throne.'

He knew the prince across the Narrow Sea, Viserys, was still to this day trying to raise an army to take back the Iron Throne. If he had a claim to the Seven Kingdoms then it would be inferior to Jon's as the trueborn son of the crown prince. No rumours ever reached him of the princess so he did not know what her character was like, but he would not see the two of them harmed if he could help it.

He would have to work in ways that his Stark heritage recoiled at here in the capital. Not only did the safety of his family demand he conduct himself in such a way, but so to did the future of the living world.

'My honour is a small price to pay for saving the realm of men. I must atone for my sins against my blood and my broken promises.' He said to reassure himself.

His first official day as Hand of the King had not gone well.

He carried out his duties to the best of his ability but he was shocked at just how far the realm had fallen. The Crown was in debt, substantial debt, not only to the Lannisters but to other Houses throughout the Seven Kingdoms. The Iron Bank was by far the most concerning debt to Ned; even in the North their reputation is well-known.

That Robert would allow the realm to languish in such debt was beyond him and yet he had not even deigned to attend the Small Council meeting. He has only attended two such meetings in his entire reign, Ned had been told.

Thoughts of debts and tourney arrangements were racing through his mind as he neared the section of the Red Keep that housed the Tyrells. He had been sorely tempted to cancel his appointment with them, but offending the second wealthiest family in the realm would not be a good idea - especially with the Crown's finances in their current state.

"Lord Hand," One of the Tyrell guards greeted him. "Lord Tyrell is expecting you. If you would follow me, my lord."

The guard led him through the various rooms that were lavishly decorated. The rose sigil of House Tyrell had been placed more or less everywhere his eyes could see, the message they were trying to convey was clear: we belong here in the capital. He had never seen Highgarden itself, but he knew
it would be much more hospitable than the Red Keep. It did not take much for him to determine
the true reason for their presence in the capital.

'They wish for the Lady Margaery to wed Joffrey,' He thought to himself as he followed the guard.
'They must not know the true character of the boy, else they would sooner marry her off to a
commoner.'

Finally, the guard stopped and opened a door that led to a dining hall. The Tyrells were seated at a
table that was practically straining from the amount of food upon it.

"Lord Hand," Lord Tyrell rose from his seat and gave yet another exaggerated bow. "I thank you
for honouring my family and myself with your presence at our table this night." He said
pompously.

"The honour is mine, Lord Tyrell," Ned said keeping his voice as controlled as possible. "To have
a hand such as your own extended in friendship so readily, it is more kindness than I expected to
receive here in the capital." He decided to add his own little word game to test the family before
him.

The slightly raised eyebrows of the Lady Olenna confirmed his first thoughts on their opinion of
him: in their eyes he was a green boy when it came to politics and word play. They were right, of
course, were it not for his Gods bestowing their wisdom upon him he would have been hopelessly
outmatched.

The others had no reaction; either they did not share the Lady Olenna's opinion or they did not care
enough to have one of their own. Lord Tyrell could only blush and stammer in his pomposity, also
as Ned had expected he would.

"Well, are we to eat this evening or are we gathered here to stand vigil for the animals on these
plates?" The Queen of Thorns said to cut across her blustering on.

Being interrupted by his mother must have been a common occurrence for Lord Tyrell. Instead of
reprimanding her, he sat down and motioned for Ned to take the seat opposite him.

"How do you fare this evening, Lady Olenna?" He asked politely as he took the indicated seat.

"I confess, Lord Hand, I am not impressed by the state of the capital," She said without preamble.
"The smell is ever present and the scenery is dreary at best. I shall be glad when I am once more in
Highgarden."

"I understand, my lady. I have only been here a night and a day and I already long for home. How
are you finding the capital, Lord Willas?" He asked the future Warden of the South.

"I am of the same opinion as my grandmother, Lord Hand," He said pleasantly. "I find myself ill at
ease in this place; the King has been most hospitable of course, but home is home, my lord." He
finished with a weary note in his voice.

"Indeed, my lord," Ned replied, nodding in sympathy. "The warmth of this city is more than I am
used to in the North. I imagine it is warmer still in the Reach?"

"It is, my lord," Willas said. "I find the smells of living in a city make it feel much more stifling
here, however. Highgarden is a fine place to call home for the scents alone, my lord."

"Lord Hand, might I ask a question about your homeland?" Lady Margaery asked, speaking for the
first time.
"Of course, my lady." He said to the girl as he made a start on his meal.

"Is it true that it snows even in the summer at times?"

He waited until he had finished chewing and swallowing his slice of beef before answering. He felt that she already knew the answer to the question, but he would humour her.

"It is so, my lady," He said with a small smile. "Though it is nothing compared to the winter snows, it is still a beautiful sight to behold."

"Have you ever seen the Wall, Lord Hand?" She asked with genuine curiosity. "Are you well, my lord?"

Her eyes along with those of her family were looking at him with concern. He had flinched quite noticeably as the question had caused his mind to focus on the memory of Jon at the Wall, alone and dying in the snow.

"Yes, forgive me, my lords and ladies," He said as calmly as possible. "I have never seen the Wall with my own eyes, but my brother serves there with the Night's Watch. We did not part on good terms, forgive my reaction, my lady." He finished with an apologetic smile to the young woman.

Her eyes softened in apparent sympathy, whereas her grandmother's narrowed in obvious suspicion. She looked as if she was about to speak, but her granddaughter had got there first.

"I am sorry to hear that, my lord. I pray the two of you can reconcile in the future," She sounded sincere. "Forgive me if I am being too intrusive, my lord, but how did the rest of your family handle your departure?" She lowered her eyes as she finished.

He was about to answer but Lord Tyrell spoke for the first time since he had taken his seat.

"Margaery, that is none of your concern. Forgive my daughter for being so bold, Lord Hand."

Lady Olenna was looking at her son with such intensity, he was sure the man could feel it. He decided to speak before he was forced to witness a family argument.

"There is nothing to forgive, my lord." He said firmly but with a smile. "Your daughter is a credit to you and your House. My youngest daughter could learn much from her," He said with a fond chuckle. "My family were not happy to see me leave, though they understood the great honour the King had done to our House by making me his Hand. We parted on good terms, my lady, for that I am truly grateful. Though, there was some grumbling about my decision to leave my children at Winterfell - particularly from my eldest daughter and my son, Brandon."

He had led them right to the question they wanted to ask, he realised too late. Thoughts of his family had broke through that detached feeling that he associated with his God's wisdom. It was too late to do anything about it, so he simply prepared for the question - he had a feeling he knew who would ask it.

"Might I ask why you left your children there, Lord Hand?" Lady Olenna asked confirming his assumption.

"I felt them too young to be in a place such as the capital, my lady," He said carefully so as not to reveal anything more. "My heir, Robb, had to remain to assume the Lordship of Winterfell in my absence. As for the rest, they would be ill-equipped for life here. My eldest daughter, Sansa, would have no doubt been fascinated at first - but I have a whole room full of the objects that did not hold such feelings for long." He finished with yet another chuckle.
The Tyrells all looked at one another as he finished speaking, he could not read the expression that flitted across their faces.

'They know something,' He realised with a jolt of fear. 'But what?'

After what seemed hours but could have only been seconds, Lord Tyrell spoke.

"My Lord Hand, I pray you will forgive my being so bold," He said slowly with all of his usual pomp. "But the King was quite, er, displeased about a betrothal between your daughter and the crown prince," He paused as he looked fearfully at Ned. "My family and I were wondering why you would refuse such a proposal, my lord?"

Ned allowed the silence to fall heavily as he held the gaze of Lord Tyrell, doing his best to let the wolf that was his sigil show. It was working if the looks on the faces of the Tyrells were anything to go by - except Lady Olenna who merely looked bored.

'It was not the King they heard this from,' He said to himself. 'They must have spies across all of the Seven Kingdoms. Of course they would ensure the events of the royal visit would be made known to them.'

Not answering would make it appear more suspicious, he knew, yet he could not speak the truth of his refusal lest he be thought a madman and a traitor.

"Lord Hand, my father only asks out of concern for me. You see," Lady Margaery broke the silence, worry evident in her voice. "My father intends to offer my own hand to the crown prince. With daughters of your own, surely you can sympathise with any concerns such news may bring to a father's heart."

He could indeed sympathise with the fears Lord Tyrell might be feeling, but he could not outright state his reasons for declining - not here in the Red Keep.

"I understand your concerns, Lord Tyrell," He said gently to the man. "I declined the betrothal because of-" He paused to sell the effect. "Because the last time a lady of House Stark was betrothed to a member of House Baratheon, my family was nearly broken. Yes, I know that there is little chance of it happening again but all the same. I consider it dishonourable to my late sister's memory, my lord."

He hated himself for using his family's tragedies to his advantage, but he could not risk his mission this early.

Apparently his answer was enough for the Tyrells, even the Queen of Thorns looked emotional as his words fell upon their ears.

"I am sorry for asking, Lord Hand. It was not my intent to cause you to remember your pain," Lady Maragery said to break the silence. "I cannot begin to imagine the suffering such history must bring to you."

Ned did not doubt the sincerity of her words this time, it was clear in her eyes that she was sympathetic.

'Perhaps she is truly a good person amongst all these schemers,' He thought to himself. 'If there is anyway of saving her from Joffrey then I must seek it out - quietly.'

The rest of their meal passed by in strained silence, broken occasionally by feeble attempts at conversation. It was a relief for all of them when Ned had announced that he would be taking his
As he entered his chambers, his thoughts were even more chaotic than they had been before his meal with the Tyrells. It was clear that they were intent on Lady Maragery being queen, so perhaps they were already aware of Joffrey's disposition. Until they saw it for themselves they would not alter their plans, he knew.

The guilt of using his sister's supposed fate also threatened to engulf him now he was alone. It was not befitting of a Stark to wield the tragedies of his kin like a blade - but this was all for the greater good of the realm. The realm his sister's son may yet rule one day. Lyanna had only had the briefest of moments with her child, but he never doubted that Jon was the most precious thing to her in this world and the one in which she now resides.

'I am doing this for you, Lya. To atone for the suffering I caused your son. I will never again be that coward. I will never again forget my blood and my oaths.' He said to her spectre as he looked out over the city.

In that moment, the burden of his mission and the knowledge of the consequences should he fail clear and present in his mind, he had never felt the weight of responsibility fall so heavily on his shoulders. He allowed himself a few more moments to wallow, and then turned to his bed to retire.

There must be many more days like this one before his work is finished. As he closed his eyes he prayed that his dreams would not be as exhausting as his life had been this day.

He should have known he would not be so fortunate.

Chapter End Notes

And Ned has entered the playing field!
His word play is OOC IMO, but I felt that writing him as he was in canon would be a poor decision, especially since the Old Gods are guiding him this time around.
Now that he has met with the Tyrells and has a better understanding of just how the realm is suffering under Robert's reign he can truly begin shaping the stage for the events to come.

The next few chapters will be quite dialogue heavy, but the action scenes are soon to begin! I'm both scared and excited to write them haha

I thank you all for reading this, and I appreciate any feedback you might have! I still find writing to be intimidating, but I love to read each and every comment!
He is a Lannister of Casterly Rock. The son of the most feared man in the Seven Kingdoms. He has one of the sharpest minds in the entire realm.

And yet he could not help but shrink under the withering gaze the young lord was directing at him.

He had been summoned to Lord Stark's study for reasons unknown to him, at least they were until he entered the room and the boy started to speak.

His investigations had not gone unnoticed then.

"By what right do you interrogate my household staff, Lord Tyrion?" Robb Stark asked with suppressed anger. "They are here to serve my family, so that they in turn can provide for their own. What cause have you to jeopardise their positions?"

That had not been his intent, he merely thought that if anyone knew what was going on in this place it would be the servants.

"I apologise, my lord," Tyrion said with as much contrition as he could manage. "I have always been of a curious disposition and the goings on here at Winterfell have caught my-"

"And why, pray tell, does your curiosity give you the right to know of my family's personal matters? To enter the resting place of my ancestors? To insult my lady mother at the very table she invited you to sit at?" Lord Stark thundered as he cut across Tyrion.

For one so young he struck an impressive figure as he leaned over the desk. It was not hard to be an impressive figure to a dwarf after all. Still, he would not be judged by a boy no matter his title.

'I am a Lannister. A lion,' He said to himself to gather his confidence. 'The lion does not cower before the wolf.'

"I meant no offence to your lady mother, Lord Stark. I admit, I could have been more tactful but I was weary from the road and the wine had loosened my tongue. I have apologised to Lady Stark and I was under the impression that she had accepted it," He said carefully. "As for my entering the crypts, you must understand that it is a place of legend to me; I am an avid reader, my lord, and the tales of the Kings of Winter are some of my favourite," He gave a small smile as he continued. "The temptation to see the resting place of such legends proved too much to resist. It must not be so for you, having grown up above such hallowed ground. I can only apologise for my behaviour, Lord Stark." He lowered his head as he finished in an attempt to appear contrite.

He could understand why the boy was so angered by his actions. His own father would have severely punished any who dared enter the Lannister tombs. He should not have expected a Stark to be any less offended.

If he had known what was going on here at Winterfell, he would have been able to ignore the urge to visit the crypts. He despised not being in the know in any situation he was in, and so his frustration at not knowing the secrets of Winterfell had caused him to trespass in the Stark's resting place.

"Your apology is accepted, my lord," The Stark boy said to break the silence. "But you are no longer welcome here at Winterfell at this time. We will not turn you away should you visit with us again, though I hope you have learned some measure of respect by then, Lord Tyrion."
He had not been expecting such an abrupt dismissal and it was hard to not be offended by it, despite knowing his actions had more than earned such treatment. The lion within him would not tolerate such an insult quietly, however.

"Should that not be the decision of your mother, Lord Stark?" He made an effort to keep his voice polite, knowing it would add more of a sting to his words. "She is the Lady of Winterfell, after all. It was she who greeted me and extended the hospitality of your home once more."

He felt a rush of satisfaction as the boy's face reddened, from anger or embarrassment he could not tell. He knew it was a risk to offend the Starks further, but they would not treat him too harshly. His father would not stand for such an insult paid to the Lannister name.

'Even if I am the lowest of the Lannisters in his eyes,' He thought to himself bitterly.

"You insult my mother. Sneak into the resting place of my kin. Interrogate my people to learn about affairs that are of no concern to you," The boy spoke slowly, every word full of restrained anger. "And now you insult me with your clever word play. I wonder, Lord Tyrion, how would Tywin Lannister respond to a guest acting in such a way?"

His words chilled Tyrion; he knew exactly how his father would punish such a person. He had overstepped, he realised. He had talked himself into a dangerous corner in a wolf's den and now he did not know what to expect from this young lord.

"Lord Stark, pray forgive me," He said as respectfully as he could. "I find I am unable to resist the urge to lash out when I feel slighted; a consequence of being what I am-"

"That you were born this way is no concern of mine, just as it is no fault of yours, Lord Tyrion," Robb cut him off. "What is your fault is your inability to resist such urges. Twice my House has extended its hospitality to you, and you have repaid us by insulting not only my mother and myself, but also the resting places of those who came before us. You still have the protection of guest right, my lord, that is the only reason I have responded not with action but with words. I will ensure that my father hears of this, however, and I pray you have a more suitable excuse for him when you reach the capital," He paused to let it all sink in. "And do not forget that the King is my uncle in all but blood, my lord. He may not take an insult to our House lightly either."

Tyrion did not know how to feel after the boy had finished speaking. He was touched that the young lord was judging him as a man, not as a dwarf. He was also afraid of facing the boy's father. The King would not harm him, not with his sister warming his bed. Lord Stark, the Hand of the King, had already forbidden him from entering the crypts and now he would be told that Tyrion had disregarded his command the moment Eddard Stark had left his home.

'Damn my foolishness. This not going to end well,' He thought to himself miserably. 'I must find a way to lessen the fallout of my actions.'

"What can I do to atone for my actions, beyond apologising, Lord Stark?" He asked. "I do not doubt that your lord father will be fair in his judgement of me. I cannot say the same of mine own; his son or no, he will not tolerate my actions and their consequences for the Lannister name lightly."

"So, you were fully aware of how dishonourable and disrespectful your actions would be to us, and yet you still carried them out? All in the name of your curiosity and because not all secrets are yours to know? Yes," He said a little louder in response to Tyrion blanching at his words. "It is plain to see that you not knowing more than anyone else is a source of discomfort for you. You are a clever man, Lord Tyrion, there is no denying it. You are not, however, the most subtle of men."
'What is it with these northerners and their ability to render me speechless?' He asked himself angrily.

"Your stay with us will end on the morrow, my lord. I will allow you to stay this night so that you may speak with my lady mother about your actions," The young lord said slowly. "It is she who will decide how those actions are to be told to my lord father," He rose as he continued speaking. "You are not to venture anywhere beyond your rooms and the courtyard. I shall ensure there are guards at the entrance to the crypts; should you approach them intending to bribe your way to another visit there - might I suggest meat instead of gold." He finished with a knowing smirk.

Tyrion was grateful for the chance to mitigate some of the damage his actions could have, but he could not help but feel insulted by the not so veiled threat. He knew the boy intended to put his wolf at the entrance to the crypts - not that Tyrion was planning another excursion there. He was silent for a few moments in order to master the reflex to insult the boy, he could not afford to waste this opportunity the young lord had given him.

"Might I ask what your lord father is to be told, Lord Stark?" He asked, hating the hint of fear he heard in his voice.

"I will not send word to my father until I have spoken with my lady mother," He replied. "Do not forget your manners when you speak to her this time, Lord Tyrion. You may leave now."

It was only the risk of losing the chance he had been given that stopped him from lashing out at the dismissal as though he were a common servant.

"I thank you for your leniency and fairness, Lord Stark," He said as he stood and gave a small bow to the boy. "Your lord father has prepared you well for this role, I see."

The boy only nodded at the compliment and so Tyrion took his leave.

'Why do I get myself into these situations?' He berated himself. 'I can only hope Lady Stark is feeling merciful, else I might as well not return to the capital. Perhaps Stark's influence with the King is greater than that of my sweet sister. I have to fix this."

And so he set out to find the Lady of Winterfell, hoping that she could be found in the areas he was still permitted access to.

'That could only be the courtyard, though I would not turn Lady Stark away from my chambers,' He thought to himself slyly. 'Except that such a dalliance would make me a head shorter for certain - and I am already short enough.'

He had hoped that he would find the Lady of Winterfell as soon as he stepped out into the courtyard. The frigid air was sharp against his skin, and his eyes watered slightly as he looked for the distinctive Tully hair.

The courtyard was full of people going about their daily business, so he decided to look for a familiar face to ask the whereabouts of Lady Stark.

As he moved through the open space he could not help but notice the looks most of the staff were giving him. No doubt they had heard of his questioning their colleagues and were not feeling very kindly towards him.

'It is a sentiment shared by all, apparently,' He thought feeling sorry for himself.
He pulled himself out of his thoughts as he spotted one of those familiar faces he was hunting for.

"Maester!" He called to the old man. "I wonder if I might have a word with you?"

The man had simply stopped and stared at Tyrion, and so he made his way over to him. Just as he was about to speak the Maester had done the same.

"Lord Tyrion, I assume you have met with Lord Stark?"

"I have, Maester. That is the reason I am out here in this cold place," He said with a small smile that was not returned. "Lord Stark has tasked me with discussing my, er, activities with Lady Stark before word is sent to the Hand of the King."

He knew full well he had earned such reprimands, but the Lannister within him was still seething at being punished by a young boy. He also hated the feeling of powerlessness he felt during his meeting with the young lord; he knew no amount of gold would cause a Stark to forget an insult paid to their House. Without his wits, gold and the weight of his name he had little in the way of defending himself.

"That is a measured and wise response to your trespasses against his House," The Maester with pride clear in his voice. "I am afraid I do not know where Lady Stark is currently. Has Lord Stark confined you only to certain areas of Winterfell, my lord?"

"He has, yes. I am permitted to enter this courtyard, and my rooms. And I assume the halls that lead to said rooms - Lord Stark was not clear on whether he wished me simply to vanish and appear between here and there."

The Maester frowned at his words but said nothing. Tyrion knew he should be more careful with his jesting, but he had to vent his frustration somehow.

'Jaime would have taken his ire to the training yard,' He thought with a stab of jealousy. 'Yet that would only prove more humiliating for me.'

"I shall search inside for Lady Stark and inform her of Lord Stark's decision," Luwin said as he nodded at Tyrion. "I will take my leave, my lord."

He decided to wait in the courtyard for whatever message he might receive from Lady Stark. He did not like the idea of going to wait in his room like a child. So he wondered around the spacious courtyard, looking on as the servants and guards were engaged in their simple tasks. He felt strangely envious of the simplicity of their lives, but then he recalled the comforts he had known that they had not and it had soon disappeared.

A flash of red caught his eye as he did yet another circuit around the area. Assuming it was the red hair of Lady Stark, he made his way over to her and the person she was speaking with. As he got closer, however, he realised it was not Lady Stark at all - this woman was much taller and her hair a good deal longer. He was about to turn away and resume his pacing around the courtyard when the woman's companion locked eyes with him.

"Lord Tyrion," Young Snow greeted him with the trace of a smile. "I trust Robb was not too harsh in his dealings with you?"

'So, everyone knows about the young lord and the old dwarf?' He seethed. 'A boy lord is one thing, but I'll be damned if I let a bastard make me feel chastised.'

"He was fair, Lord Star-" He stopped deliberately to make an apologetic face. "Snow. Forgive me,
I have had to utter those words many times today. I meant no offence, young Snow."

He waited for the boy to react, eager for the satisfaction he would feel even as he felt shame creep upon him. He liked this boy, despite knowing it must have been him who had informed his brother of his excursion.

The satisfaction never came. Young Snow merely smiled at him and nodded his head in acceptance of his false apology. His frustration grew to the point he was certain he would not be able to hold his tongue. Fortunately, and unfortunately, words failed him as the woman in red turned to face him.

"It must be difficult, my lord, to rely on words so much and to have them fail when you so desperately need them to succeed," Her voice was full of mystery and it caused him to shudder internally. "We all have our shields we hide behind, my lord, yet even the lightest of them can grow too heavy if they are not put down from time to time."

If the confusion he now felt was how Tyrion had made others feel, he should probably write a thousand letters of apology. He did not like this feeling at all. Not one bit. He was an intelligent man even if he was half a man - yet this woman had baffled him by saying something that sounded like nothing.

'Others take these people,' He screamed inside his head. 'It is not enough that they look down on me, now I must also be made to feel like a simpleton?'

Despite how insulted he had felt when he was informed of it, he was suddenly glad that he would be leaving this place on the morrow.

"I have not had the pleasure, Lady?" He asked the woman who was staring at him so intently.

"My name is Melisandre."

"Well met, Melisandre. I am Tyrion of House Lannister." He said with as much pride as he could muster.

"What did Robb decide to do with you?" A new voice had asked him.

He had not noticed the youngest Stark girl leaning idly behind her bastard brother - they looked so alike it was startling. She did not resemble any of her trueborn siblings as strongly as she did young Snow.

"I am to speak with your lady mother, before being sent away on the morrow, Lady Arya." He smiled as the girl's face screwed up. He knew she hated being called a lady.

"I'm not a lady, Imp," She said cuttlingly. "It's just Arya."

Young Snow turned on his little sister, about to berate her he was sure. In truth, Tyrion was more amused than angry at how she had spoken to him. He was about to tell the boy to leave her and continue their banter but a shout had silenced him and Snow.

"ARYA STARK! How **dare** you address a lord in such a way!" Lady Stark's affronted voice heralded her presence.

He was both relieved and annoyed by her sudden appearance. Relieved because it meant he could get this unpleasant business over with. Annoyed because he had no idea what he would say to the Lady of Winterfell.
"I meant nothing by it, mother," The young girl said easily. "Besides he disrespected us when-"

"And you have also disrespected your House by behaving in such a way," Catelyn said over her daughter. "You will go to your rooms immediately, and stay there until myself or Septa Mordane come to deal with you, young lady. Go." She finished in a dangerous voice as the little Stark opened her mouth to protest.

She turned to her bastard brother who merely shrugged his shoulders with an amused expression. He was sure Lady Stark was going to reprimand him for such behaviour, but he was surprised as she ignored it and faced Tyrion. Her eyes still following her sulking daughter as she stormed away from them all.

"I apologise for my daughter's words once again, Lord Tyrion," She said genuinely. "I must do more to ensure she is disciplined and reigned in whilst my husband is absent, it seems. Now, Maester Luwin has told me you wish to speak with me?"

He was about to answer her before young Snow started to speak to his father's wife.

"I shall take my leave, Lady Stark. I shall see if Robb has any task for me to occupy myself with."

The expression on Catelyn Stark's well controlled face was most curious. She was not looking at the boy the same way she had done the first time he visited this place. If he had to name the expression she was currently wearing it would be curiosity.

'What is there to be curious about?' He wondered. 'She knows all she needs to; that he is the result of her husband shaming her.'

He knew he could not risk commenting on such a scene, not in his current situation, but he could not keep entirely silent.

"I would assume you would wish to be present for the rest of my chastisement, young Snow?" He said smiling at the bastard. "Given that I have you to thank for it." He chuckled to prevent any tension from forming.

He need not have bothered as the young man only smiled once more and gave a mock bow.

"It was my duty, Lord Tyrion. I would have done the same had I caught Robb snooping in a place he ought not to be."

"Lady Stark," The woman, Melisandre, spoke suddenly. "Perhaps Lord Tyrion and yourself should speak in private? The matters you should discuss should not be made common knowledge."

Her eyes had never left Tyrion as she spoke. He knew he should not risk being alone with the Lady of Winterfell - he could lose more than his pride if rumours started spreading about such a meeting but the strange woman had trapped him.

'How could she know how to corner me?' He thought suddenly wary. 'She knew exactly what to say to force my curiosity to make the choice for me.'

Lady Stark was looking at Tyrion intently as she considered Melisandre's words. She glanced briefly at her husband's bastard and then returned her gaze to him before nodding.

"Yes, you are right, my lady. Come, Lord Tyrion," She said as she turned and motioned for him to follow. "We shall talk inside and you can tell me what my son has decided." She turned back to young Snow and his companion. "I shall see the two of you at evening meal."
He nodded at the bastard and his foreign woman and made to follow the Lady of Winterfell, but the enigmatic voice of the Red Woman had him turning back to her.

"I am told that you are a clever man, my lord. It is often the most cleverest of men that cannot comprehend the simplest of truths. Might I give you a piece of advice, Lord Tyrion?"

All he could do was nod, he did not understand how this woman could affect him so. He was no stranger to beautiful women - which she most definitely was. He was also curious as to what advice she had for him.

"Do not let your hatred for your body cloud your mind any longer. You may never look down on another man, but you could cast a very large shadow upon the realm. If all of the world's secrets were known to you, you would simply be the world's most well informed fool. Wisdom is found in pursuit of hidden truths, yet you allow yourself only to feel resentment at such opportunities," Her expression never changed as she uttered these words. "The Lord of Light creates us all for a purpose, yours may not be to wield a sword but there are far more potent weapons you are worthy of. Open your eyes, my lord." And with that she turned and walked away from him.

He was at a complete loss, unsure if he had just been insulted or complimented. He looked to young Snow for clarification, but he only gave another shrug and turned to follow the Red Woman. Unable to speak, he turned back to the Lady of Winterfell.

"Let us go, my lord," She said not unkindly. "The Lady Melisandre speaks wisely, but that does not make her words any less unnerving. Come."

'I will never visit this place again,' He silently vowed to himself. 'For all the wonder I had hoped to discover, it seems I learned more about myself in this frozen land.'

He was eager to get this business finished with. If he resolved the matter with Lady Stark quickly, he may yet be able to depart this very day. He followed the Lady to what he assumed was her solar and glanced around fearfully before stepping inside.

He could not help but shiver as the door closed with a barely audible, but ominous thud.
When Catelyn first heard that Tyrion Lannister had entered the crypts of Winterfell she was furious.

Once she had calmed down, however, she was glad that Ned was in the capital for the first time. Her husband would have reacted with fury had he been here when Jon had told Robb of the Lannister's trespassing. He would not have harmed the man, she knew, but he would have punished him enough to cause Tywin Lannister to feel slighted.

Even before hearing this she was already quite frustrated with Tyrion's presence in her home. That first night when he had broached the topic of Jon's mother she had felt terror such as she had never known before. It had not been too difficult to revert back to a shamed wife in order to exit the scene, but she knew he would not let the matter lie.

When he came to her the next day to apologise for his behaviour, she accepted with as much dignity as a lady should. Believing that was the end of it, she allowed herself to once more wallow in the misery that had gripped her since her husband had left to serve as Hand of the King.

She should have known better than to believe the rest of Lord Tyrion's stay would be without incident.

Four days after the arrival of that strange woman, Melisandre, Robb had summoned her to his father's - now his - study. There she was told of Tyion's intrusion in the crypts and his questioning of their staff about matters that were not his to know. When Robb had told her that it was Jon who had informed him of the Lannister's actions, she suspected he had done so in order to have him dismissed from Winterfell before he could learn anything too damaging.

She also suspected that the foreign priestess was the one Ned had spoken of. The one who would tell Jon more of this supposed great threat and his role in facing it. Judging by how much time the two of them spent together, she was confident her assumption was correct.

And now, she finds herself in her solar with Tyrion Lannister. The Lady Melisandre had given her the idea to use this opportunity, and use it she would.

"Maester Luwin has informed me of my son's judgement, Lord Tyrion," She said to begin what might be a long discussion. "You are to depart from Winterfell on the morrow, but it seems I am to determine how word of your actions here are reported to my husband in King's Landing."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, it was clear he was not used to being treated as such. No doubt he would usually offer gold or utter his father's name to avoid any consequences of his actions.

"Yes, Lady Stark. He was quite fair in his judgement, I am not too proud to admit as much," He said reluctantly. "Might I ask what you intend to say of my stay here to your lord husband?"

'He is worried about facing Ned when he returns to the capital,' She realised. 'I can use this to frame his perspective of the situation he will be met with there.'

"Truthfully, my lord, I shall be informing my husband of all of your disrespectful actions here. I
swear I will not embellish any of them, and will endeavour to ensure Ned can stifle the King's reaction should he also discover your trespasses here at Winterfell."

Her words had the intended effect as the little lord quickly sat up in his chair and gave all of his attention to her, his expression was confused and a little afraid.

"The King? I am afraid I do not understand, Lady Stark," he said quickly. "I know that he and your husband are close, but he is my goodbrother and-"

"Lord Tyrion, do you know whose tomb you were stood in front of when Jon found you in the crypts? We do. And so will my lord husband when I send word to him. That is why the King may be wroth with you, my lord." She interrupted him calmly.

She was making a dangerous gambit, she knew. Her words could easily lead to the Lannister lord plotting against her husband, whereas she hoped that they would cause him to see Ned as a friend, or at least an ally, when he returns to the capital.

She knew Lord Tyrion had put the pieces together when his mouth fell open slightly in shock, there was no denying the fear in his expression now.

"My reasons for being in the crypts were merely to satisfy my own curiosity - I know that does not excuse my actions but," he was flustered. "I swear to you, Lady Stark, I did not go down there with any intention of disrespecting Lady Lyanna's resting place."

Now that she had him unravelled enough, she must be careful not to make her attempts too obvious. This man was no fool, no matter how foolish his impulses made him act.

"I know that, my lord. I shall ensure my husband also knows as much, but the King is, as you know, rather," she paused to find the right word, aware that she was talking about the ruler of the realm. "He loved my good sister fiercely. Men who love fiercely do not always think clearly where the person of their love is concerned. Ned tells me that the King still harbours affection for his late sister, despite the years that have passed since she was taken from him."

She allowed the silence to fall as the Lannister lord was mulling over her words. The fear was still clear on his face, but so to were the telltale signs of deep thinking.

'He is trying to determine how best to turn this to his advantage,' she thought. 'His dealings with Robb today will have made it clear Ned will accept no amount of gold. He has been around the King for years and must know of his disposition.'

Did he know of that particular disposition? Would it be too much of a risk to mention it?

Before she could decide, Tyrion had found his voice once more.

"I admit, you are right about his lingering affection for the Star- for Lady Lyanna," he quickly changed his addressing of her late good sister, looking at her with wide eyes. "Apologies, my lady, an unfortunate habit I learned from my sister. The King often speaks of his lost love when he is in his cups and my sister, as you might imagine, does not handle this well," he took a deep, steadying breath before continuing. "I also know how little control the King has over his temper. Lady Stark," he once more took a deep breath to gather himself. "Is there anything I can say or do to convince you to allow me to inform Lord Stark of my poor conduct here myself when I join him in the capital?"

She had not been expecting this. She had expected him to regain his confidence and to be silently
plotting to have his sister act as advocate on his behalf. His asking for the chance to be allowed to confess directly to his lord husband was not something she expected of a Lannister.

'But how would Ned react?' She thought worriedly. 'What if his reaction brings him more enemies than friends? He is an emotional man, despite what others might think.'

"Lord Tyrion, I am afraid that is not my decision to make," She said to stall for time. "I am to inform my son of mine own opinions, but it is he who will send the raven to my lord husband."

"Might you ask your son to speak with me then?" He sounded calm once more but his eyes were still hinting at fear. "I swear I will not use this opportunity to lie about my actions here. There would be consequences if the King were to, er, direct his rage at me."

She raised her eyebrows at the implied threat. She was terrified that she had overplayed her hand and had sentenced Ned to the repercussions of her ill-advised gambit. Just as she opened her mouth to apologise and do some pleading of her own, Tyrion continued hurriedly.

"I do not say this to threaten your family, Lady Stark. My lord father would not take the news well, and while he may not think much of me, I still carry the Lannister name. His pride would not allow such an act to go unpunished."

'It would not be wise to make an enemy of Tywin Lannister,' She thought to herself. 'The man who commands the beast that would kill babes so brutally."

She still had trouble imagining the King who was her husband's best friend taking joy in such barbarism, but she could not use that knowledge to her advantage just now.

She could, however, turn this situation around with the more merciful Lannister before her.

"I do not say this to threaten your family, Lady Stark. My lord father would not take the news well, and while he may not think much of me, I still carry the Lannister name. His pride would not allow such an act to go unpunished."

"Lady Stark," He paused to clear his throat. "I am surprised that you would say such a thing, given the way I have disrespected you and your home," His voice was thick with emotion, which surprised Cat. "I truly am sorry for my words to you on my first night back here. It is none of my business, I know. That you think me a good man is touching, and only adds to my regret for my actions."

That was what she was expecting. She had not needed to draw on her southern lessons of word play for so long, it was refreshing to do so - though that did not lessen the fear of saying the wrong thing at all. She knew she was in a safer position now, however, and could play one last card before ending this meeting.

"My lord husband will be furious with you for violating the resting place of his ancestors, my lord. I do not want you to assume he will be any less so because you are confessing it to him as one man to another," She sighed as she thought of how Tyrion would see her husband again before she did. "As for the interrogation of my household staff, I do not know what gave you cause to do such
things. Perhaps you might tell me why you chose to do so?"

She was genuinely curious about that. A part of her feared that he had discovered the truth somehow and was attempting to gather witnesses to take to the capital. As outlandish as that seemed, Cat had been fraught with worry ever since she learned the truth about Jon.

"I confess, Lady Stark, it was something I felt in the atmosphere here at Wintferfell. Your reaction when I asked of young Snow's mother was the reason I was so eager to uncover the truth," He said with enough decency to lower his eyes, at least. "None of this excuses my behaviour, my lady, I am fully aware. It was just how differently things had felt since my first time here."

She should have expected a man as observant as Tyrion Lannister to pick up on the subtle changes around Winterfell. Though it was only Jon, herself and Melisandre, she suspected, that knew the truth of his birth - she was aware of how it seemed to affect the very air of Winterfell. Even her children had started asking questions she wished they would not.

Knowing she must settle this particular aspect of the Lannister lord's curiosity, she took a deep breath and allowed the shame she always felt these days to show on her face.

"My reaction was extreme, my lord. That much is true, only," She took another deep breath to truly sell the act. "I have been cruel to Jon his entire life, and have encouraged my children to view him as a bastard more than a brother. I feared that he would attempt to usurp my children's birthright and I was jealous of his mother. I'm sure you know of my husband's reputation as an honourable man, my lord," She paused to look across at the man. He nodded slowly, his face rapt with attention. "That my honourable husband would break a sacred vow was a shock, my lord. I have lived in fear of the woman who tempted him."

She drew on those thoughts of that broken little boy whose heart she had brutally crushed. She did this to allow a few tears to flow from her eyes to make the half lie she was about to tell more convincing.

"That changed shortly before your return to Winterfell. I learned that the woman I had feared for so long had died birthing the boy I had allowed to feel excluded from his family." Her breath hitched with genuine emotion as she spoke. "I am a proud woman, I will not deny it. I am a daughter of House Tully and I do not take insults lightly, but I am also a mother. As a mother, I would be devastated if my child whom I died bringing into this world was treated the way I have allowed Jon to be. The way that I have treated him," She looked once more at the Lannister lord and could see nothing but sympathy and understanding on his face. "Do you see now why things are different? As I learned the truth, so too did Jon."

The Lannister lord exhaled sharply through his nose as he closed his eyes. She knew he liked Jon, that was plain enough for her to see. Perhaps he sympathised with Jon as his own lady mother had perished birthing him, just as Lyanna had with her son.

"I am truly, truly sorry for my actions, Lady Stark," He sounded genuine for the first time. "I have lived with the guilt of my life being paid for with that of my mother's. I could not imagine hoping to meet her all my days only to discover she had been dead the whole time. Again, I apologise for my behaviour and I am grateful for the opportunity to right them myself. A Lannister always pays his debts, my lady. If there is anything I can do to repay you and your family for your understanding, you need only ask."

That was what she had been hoping to hear. The conclusion she had desired now achieved, she wished this meeting to be over with. She was so emotional these past few weeks she often had to be alone to allow herself to feel without observation.
"I thank you, my lord," She said as she rose and cleared her throat. "I must apologise myself. My emotional outburst was not proper, my lord. And I must ask that you not speak of Jon's mother to anyone in Winterfell; he has enough pain to contend with without the castle knowing of his shattered hopes."

"Of course, Lady Stark. I shall not speak of this to anyone here," He looked as if he meant it. "I will take my leave now, my lady. I can see you are tired. Shall I send for anyone to attend you?"

She appreciated his thoughtfulness, even though she was unsure if it was simply an act. He really was a different kind of Lannister compared to his brother and sister.

"No, thank you, Lord Tyrion," She said warmly with a smile. "I should like to be alone before I must resume my duties. You may join my family and I at table tonight, should you wish, to show that all is forgiven on our part, but," She had to be clear with him. "The same cannot be said for my lord husband, though I promise once more to do my best to temper his reaction, Lord Tyrion."

"That is more than I expected and much more than I deserve, Lady Stark," He nodded his head in acknowledgement. "I shall be sure to remember my manners this evening, my lady. Until then."

And with that he walked out of her solar as fast as his stunted legs could carry him.

She sat back in her chair with a heavy sigh. The fears of her word game with the Lannister lord had exhausted her. She prayed to the Seven she had not won an enemy for her husband in the capital.

'At least his curiosity is satisfied in regards to Jon's mother,' She thought to herself with a small sense of victory. 'He is off that particular trail. If only Jon and I could resolve our own issues in one conversation.'

She was still unsure how she felt about the hidden Targaryen, but she knew he was family. And as a Tully, there is nothing - nothing - more sacred in this life than family.

It was a few days after Lord Tyrion's departure that she allowed herself to relax for the first time in weeks.

He had not been her guest for very long, but the short duration of his stay had caused her no end of headaches. If this was how Ned had felt all those years the truth was his burden alone to bear, she could not imagine how he retained his sanity.

Robb had sent the letter to his father informing him of Lord Tyrion's need for an audience with him upon his arrival at the capital. She still dreaded her husband's reaction, she knew just how sacred the crypts were to the Starks and that Ned had already prohibited the Lannister from entering them.

'Now he is gone, I can turn my attentions to my family,' She thought happily.

She had not been as attentive as a mother should be to her children in the wake of all that had been revealed.

Sansa had finally exhausted her anger at almost becoming queen, and was back to her usual dutiful self. Arya was training almost all of the time with her Essosi instructor; she was much easier to manage now she had something she enjoyed so much.

'It is still not proper for a lady to do such things,' She huffed to herself. 'Though, if I am honest, Arya will never be the lady her sister already is. So then what will her future be?'
Bran had recovered almost immediately from his missed adventures in the capital. Ned had promised to find him a knight to squire for and so he spent all of his free time speculating as to who it would be. Rickon was almost always to be found with his direwolf wandering around Winterfell doing as he pleased. Out of all of the wolves her children had adopted, it was his that was the most wild. It had already attacked one unfortunate servant; she could not bring herself to deprive her son of his wolf, but nor could she allow her staff to be savaged by it.

Robb had taken to his new position as well as she had expected. She was full of pride for her eldest son. He may not have the look of a Stark, but he had the respect of his bannermen as only a Stark could. His own wolf was much more tame compared to those of her other children, except Sansa's, and responded to Robb's command well enough. Though she was glad that the snowy white wolf was there to reign them all in should they get too out of hand. It appeared the wolf of the boy she had despised for so long was the alpha of the pack. The irony was not lost on her.

Thoughts of the unnaturally beautiful wolf brought its master to the centre of her mind. She had attempted numerous times to force herself to speak with Jon in private but had always put it off at the last moment. She knew they needed to resolve their lingering issues before the rest of the family put the pieces together, but she could not bring herself to face the fullness of her shame and broken oaths to her Gods.

It appeared the choice to avoid such a situation was no longer hers to make as the knock at her door brought her out of her thoughts.

"Enter," She said as neutrally as she could, adjusting herself to receive her visitor.

Jon entered her solar and closed the door behind him. His expression was determined but he looked as uncomfortable as Catelyn now felt.

"Jon, what is it?" She asked quickly.

He cast his eyes about the room before settling on her and answering.

"I apologise for disturbing you, Lady Stark. I have come to inform you that I intend to ride for the Wall in two days time."

That was not what she had expected him to say. She was so shocked at his words that she was unable to do anything but stare at him.

He shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, his eyes looking anywhere but at her. It was clear that he was waiting for her to dismiss him and for some reason that hurt Catelyn.

"J-Jon, why do you intend to join the Night's Watch?" She finally asked. "Your fath- Lord Stark was clear that he did not wish for you to join and," She paused to gather her courage, knowing that she should speak if he truly was intending to leave. "In truth, I do not wish for you to take the black."

His eyes had snapped to her as she said these words and that only made her feel more uncomfortable. She was surprised by just how true those words had been. Now that she knew he would not usurp her children's birthrights, that he was her nephew as much as her husband's, she could not bear the thought of him wasting away at the Wall.

"I do not intend to join the Night's Watch, my lady," He said hoarsely. "I intend to travel there to meet with my uncle, my other uncle." He looked at her meaningfully.

She did not understand what he could possibly mean by this. Benjen was his only living uncle.
Well, besides Ned and the remaining son of the Mad King across the Narrow Sea. That thought caused her to recoil in shock.

"The Mad King's son, Viserys, he is at the Wall? Jon, you cannot be seen with-"

"No, Lady Stark. The maester at Castle Black is Aemon Targaryen. Lord Tyrion told me so when I found him in the crypts."

She was relieved to hear this and also confused as to why Benjen had never mentioned this man in all his visits from the Wall.

"And why do you intend to speak with this man, Jon?" She asked with a calm voice. "He is like to be very old. He may not even believe you are who you say; the entire realm believes your father a villain. Forgive me, I should have considered my words."

Jon had flinched when she had referred to his true father as though she had struck him. It was still a shock for him, she knew, as it would be for anyone in his situation. Still, she had to know why he intended to speak with his Targaryen kin - it could put her family at risk if his actions at the Wall should reach the King.

"The Lady Melisandre, she told me of what I-" He cleared his throat. "What I saw when the Gods granted me an audience with them. I know it sounds as though I am mad, Lady Stark, but I assure you I am not. Lord Stark would not have told me the truth of who I am were it not for the Gods speaking with him also." She could not miss the anger and bitterness in his voice as he finished speaking.

In truth, she shared a little of his anger at being kept in the dark and used to sell a lie she had no idea about. She could not imagine how deep Jon's anger went.

Thinking of her own role in her husband's lie had caused her to remember why she had avoided being alone with Jon. She still did not wish to have the discussion she knew they must, but if Jon had the courage to journey so far to confront the truth, she could not hide from it any longer when it was in front of her.

"Jon," She ventured. "Please, won't you sit down? We must needs talk. I know we would both rather avoid such things, but there is too much in the past to simply ignore."

"My lady, I-"

"Please, Jon. I do not ever expect your forgiveness, nor will I ever forgive myself for my treatment of you. Let us at least try to move past this as best as we can. Please."

With clear reluctance, he drew the chair closest to him and sat down. He was looking at the corner of her desk and his expression made it clear he was not comfortable with what was to come.

Knowing that she was the one who had the explaining to do, it was only fair that she begin the discussion.

"I have already told you my reasons for my treatment of you. I know that they do not excuse such treatment, and I do not expect you to understand my fears, but-"

"Lady Stark, I do understand why you would have been indifferent towards me. What I cannot understand is what I did beyond being alive to deserve your cruelty." Jon interrupted her.

They had both been emotional the last time they spoke alone. She did not have to control the urge
to lash out at him for interrupting her; a part of her was glad his anger would allow him to speak plainly with her.

"I believed you were a bastard, Jon." She said patiently. "If I had had a hand in raising you, you would have learned that bastards are not the kind of people to have around trueborn children. They are by their very nature-"

"Innocent."

He had said only one word, and had said it so quietly it was almost a whisper but still, she was silent as though she had been struck dumb.

The silence that followed was the heaviest she had ever known, yet she could not bring herself to break it. She could do nothing but stare at the man before her as though seeing him for the first time.

There was no trace of that child she had soothed when he was ill. No trace of the boy who scurry away from her withering gaze. No part of this man before her was of that bastard boy she had denied all the affection she could.

She noticed the flash of purple in his Stark grey eyes as he looked at her fiercely.

"You will not sit there and tell me the nature of bastards, Lady Stark," He said with authority. "Not when I was raised as one, under your hateful eyes I might add. All you know of being a bastard is what you have been told by your Septons and sacred texts. No," He said loudly as she opened her mouth to protest. "You will listen and then you will speak."

As much as she wanted to rage at him for giving her orders in her own home, she could not. Every syllable of his voice was filled with such power she could not do anything but obey. It scared her so deeply she wanted to flee from her own solar.

"You did not deny me clothing, food nor shelter. As much as you might not have ordered them to be given to me, you could have made my life much more miserable," His expression softened as he said these words. "What you denied me was much more precious to a boy, Lady Stark. Love. Family. Do you remember the single time I tried to join Sansa and Robb as they sat with you and Lord Stark in your chambers?"

She could only nod, her voice was still refusing to obey her own wishes.

"I had never felt so devastated as I did that night. I longed for my mother so much, I could barely breathe," Pain entered his voice as he spoke. "It was then, as sleep refused to grant me a reprieve, that I realised what being a bastard meant. I was less than Robb and Sansa. I was not to be loved by you as a mother, nor openly by Lord Stark as a father. I was alone in every way a child should not have to be. And I ask you, my lady, what was the reason you allowed this to become my life? We both know why Lord Stark did nothing, but why did you not attempt to accept me?"

"B-because you were a-"

"Bastard, yes. I had stained the honour of Eddard Stark by being born; he had not dishonoured himself by bedding someone other than you it seemed," He looked at her so intently it was as if he could see into her soul. "I ask you, Lady Stark, what Gods can claim to be good if they would persecute innocent children instead of weak men unable to control their urges?"

She wished she had never forced this conversation upon them both. She had expected his anger and her shame to be the most prominent emotions. She had not expected to see this commanding side
of the boy she had watched grow up, but her shame grew ever more with each word he spoke.

He was right. She was devoted to the Seven and that would never change, but she had treated Jon so harshly because she believed he was as her faith had described all bastards. It shamed her deeply to realise she had never before considered his point on the matter. Yes, she had thought her husband had broken their marriage vows and had fathered a child on another woman. She had been angry with Ned but she had still loved him. Jon, even if he were Ned's bastard son, had always been innocent.

Once more her eyes flooded with tears of shame as she allowed the truth of Jon's words to take root in her soul.

He did not say anything as she wept so openly. He stood and began to pace around her solar as she attempted to compose herself.

When at last she had managed to do so, she looked up at Jon and found he had resumed his seat. His expression was much kinder than it had been but it still had a hardened edge to it.

"I-I had never before considered ho-how wrong my beliefs could be," Her voice was still hoarse from her tears. "You were innocent, as all bastards are of being born, I realise now. I have always believed myself to be a good mo-mother but how can I be if I would hate an innocent child for the sins of his father?" Her voice broke as she finished speaking and she lowered her chin to her chest, unable to look at Jon.

She was surprised at the sudden pressure on her shoulder. Looking up she saw Jon had leaned across her desk and had placed his hand on her left shoulder. He gave it a small squeeze before releasing it and easing back into his seat.

It felt strange to be touched by him, but it was comforting to know that he was not cruel enough to watch her suffer despite how she allowed his life to be. It only added to her shame.

"My lady, it is clear that this will not be resolved today," He said not unkindly. "Perhaps it never will be. I cannot forget all those years I had felt like an outcast, nor can I expect to forget all those years you endured with the evidence of your husband's supposed infidelity under your nose. I was never blind to your own suffering, Lady Stark. I simply wished you would look past it to see my own."

He stood as he finished speaking and looked down upon her.

"I expect to be gone for a while, Lady Stark," He said. "Perhaps some time without me under your eye will help you to work through what we need to say to one another. I apologise for my being so harsh with you today, I-" He paused as he looked once more like that meek bastard. "I do not know what came over me. This is why I need to speak with my uncle at the Wall. I do not how to be a Targeryan." He finished with a weak smile that Catelyn was surprised to find herself returning.

Realising the truth of his words, she stood and attempted to gather herself.

"Be sure to spend time with Arya before you go, Jon," She said with her voice still raw from emotion. "It will be a hard task to prevent her from following you there. Despite how much she loves her combat lessons, she loves you even more," She stopped to consider the words she had spoken. "She was strong enough to love you when I should have. I only wish I could have followed her example, Jon."

He looked taken aback by her words, but his expression quickly turned into one of determination.
"If I am successful at the Wall, much will change when I return to Winterfell," He said ominously. 
"I will not say how, but if I am indeed successful - there will be no hiding the truth, at least not 
from the people at Winterfell."

"What do you intend to do?" She asked as fear flooded through her. "Do you intend to stake your claim for the Iron Throne?"

"No, my lady. Rather, I do not know." He shook his head as if to ward off an annoying fly. "There are things I must do to prepare for the threat that is coming. I am still not entirely sure of them myself but I know I must do them." He looked at her dead in the eye again as he continued. "I know you may struggle to believe this, Lady Stark, but there is something coming for this realm. It will not care who sits on the Iron Throne. We must be ready for it and it is only myself, Lord Stark and Lady Melisandre who believe it to be true."

It was true that she was not entirely convinced that some great evil was rising beyond the Wall, other than the wildlings who sometimes pillaged the North. Still, she could not outright refute the claims of both her husband and Jon; not when she remembered that they had both seen their son's corpse defiled and her own death.

"I do not know what to believe, Jon," She said with a shudder. "I have not seen the things you and Ned have, but I have seen enough to be open to the idea of something evil descending upon the realm," She paused to gather herself. "Will you be travelling to the Wall alone? Are you going to send word to Benjen of your intentions?"

"No, my lady. Melisandre, Maro and Garret will be accompanying me, and no," He replied. "I will not be sending word to the Wall, I wish for my visit there to be as secret as possible. I do not want word reaching the capital of my visit to the last Targaryen in Westeros - or so many believe." He allowed himself another small smile as he said these words. "I will take my leave now, Lady Stark. I apologise once more for my harsh words this day, though I do not regret them. I hope, in time, we may move on from the past - but I can make no promises."

"Neither can I, Jon. Though, I still must atone for breaking an oath to my Gods," She grimaced as confusion filled his features.

She had not told him of the promise she made to herself when Jon was like to die. She did not know how he would receive such news, but she felt like now was the time to tell him.

"When you were ill as a child, before I-" She stopped as she recalled the memory of wounding Jon so deeply. "Before I crushed your hopes. I swore to the Seven that if they spared you from succumbing to your sickness, that not only would be a mother to you - as I have already told you. I also swore to them that I would have Ned legitimise you and do my duty to you. I was not strong enough to keep this oath, though the Gods did their part. It has haunted me everyday since." She lowered her head in shame once more. "Not only did I break your heart that night, I broke a vow I had made to the Gods who had blessed me with my children."

There was yet another strained silence as Jon absorbed her words. It did not last very long as he cleared his throat to get her attention, looking up at him she saw only pain on his face now.

"I had no idea, Lady Stark. That you were prepared to do as much is touching, yet, I cannot pretend it will suddenly change my long held resentment towards you," He pursed his lips before letting out a long exhale. "It seems there is still much we must discuss with one another. Winterfell is truly a place of secrets." He let out a short laugh and Catelyn allowed herself a small smile. "We will talk more when I return, my lady. In the meantime I shall take your advice and ensure Arya does not follow me to the Wall. I am sure she would somehow knock it down were she to visit there."
His laugh was genuine that time.

With a short nod to her, he turned on his heel and exited her solar.

Once more she fell back into her chair as though her legs had failed her. In the span of a few days she had had two exhausting, emotional and intensive conversations with two men she had never thought to have such words with. She had much more success with Tyrion than she did with Jon, she thought with regret. Still, she had seen the truth of her own beliefs about Jon as a bastard. She would never cast out the Seven from her heart, but she could not help but agree with Jon's words about her faith's opinion of bastards.

'How much longer must I endure all of this alone before you are returned, Ned?' She thought, once more longing for her stoic husband. 'I pray it will not be much longer.'

With that thought, she allowed herself to get lost in the memories of happier times with her husband and children. Though she could not savour each one of them as they flitted through her mind, as now they all contained the ghost of a bastard boy hovering miserably at the edge of her happy gatherings. The suffering she had caused him written so plainly on his little face, it was not long before her own was once more covered in tears.

'I will make this right,' She swore in her heart to her Gods once more. 'No matter if it takes the rest of my days.'

Chapter End Notes

My main intention with this chapter was to display Catelyn's own skill with words against such a player as Tyrion. This might seem too OOC for her, but my version of Catelyn will have a bigger role in the political side of the story than she did with her son as King in the North. Tyrion's reaction will make more sense with his next POV, though as many of you would expect, he was also playing his own angle the entire meeting.

I originally planned to have Jon and Catelyn make much more progress in establishing a relationship in the new reality of things. I decided to go down this route as I wanted Ned and Catelyn to be the first to witness the 'King Jon' persona. I also needed Catelyn to realise the truth of her own religion and its view on bastards and how it conflicts with her natural motherly instincts.

This is perhaps the longest dialogue chapter I have written and I am grateful for any who made it through the entire thing lol

We leave the North next chapter and when we return the action scenes will begin!

Thanks once more for reading, and let me know your thoughts on this chapter in the comments! All advice is appreciated :)*
Margaery had never missed Highgarden as much as she did right now. This was the longest she had ever been away from the Reach.

She has been in King’s Landing for almost two moons now, and she still has yet to be be presented to the King as a potential bride for the crown prince.

She did not know why her grandmother was stalling the proposal; her lord father was most eager to solidify their position at court, but something was keeping the Queen of Thorns from allowing it to be so.

Her grandmother being the true head of House Tyrell, naturally it all happened as she decreed.

While she was not in a hurry to call Joffrey her husband, she was impatient to wield the power that would allow her to change so many lives here in the capital and beyond.

‘Starting with those poor souls in that area they call Flea Bottom,’ She thought to herself. ‘As much as I am doing now, it would have a much greater effect if I were known to be the future Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.’

She had spent as much time as possible with the smallfolk of King’s Landing. Both because she wanted to help ease their hard lives and to ensure she is popular with them when the time comes. She knew the current Queen was not interested in getting to know her subjects, and that would prove to be a mistake on her part when Margaery came into her own title.

Senna and her babe had become dear friends of hers. She genuinely loved spending what little time she could with them. Little Flynn adored her just as much as she did him, and Senna had proven herself to be a useful ally in ensuring her name and generosity was well-known amongst her fellow citizens. She had thought of offering Senna a position with her entourage, but her grandmother had quickly shut the idea down.

“It would not be wise to invite commoners into the Red Keep, child,” She had said when Margaery first broached the idea. “Give the woman coin and a few guards if you need to, but it would only offend the King and his wife if you assume you have the right to invite others into their home.”

She could see the wisdom in her grandmother’s words, but that did not make her like them. She had done as her grandmother suggested and ensured Senna and Flynn had all they needed, but it did not ease her frustration at having her hands tied.

The arrival of the new Hand of the King had breathed fresh life into the goings on at court.

She liked Lord Stark; despite the awkward meal they had shared his second night in the capital. Her grandmother had suggested inviting him to an intimate setting in the hopes of lowering his guard, but they had been surprised to discover he was not entirely unskilled when it came to wielding words at the table.

It was the subject of the Hand of the King and their plan for ensuring his loyalty to them that found her sitting in the gardens with her grandmother. They were there to discuss and plot as usual, but she did enjoy the view of Blackwater Bay from their quiet nook in the teeming gardens.
“So, Lord Stark has proven himself more capable than I anticipated,” Her grandmother said as soon as their servants were out of earshot. “Admittedly, that does pose a problem to our original plan. It will take more than feeding his people during winter to convince him to wed his precious daughter to your brother.”

“He does seem to like Willas, grandmother,” Margaery said. “And Willas has nothing but respect for Lord Stark. Perhaps we can find a less dishonest way to solidify the friendship between our Houses?”

Olenna looked at her as if she were stupid, which was not a look Margaery was used to receiving from her grandmother.

“What is dishonest about marrying a lord’s daughter to the heir of a Great House, my dear?” She asked with a certain edge to her voice. “And what better way to solidify an alliance than having said daughter and heir sharing a bed as man and wife?”

Margaery knew better than to answer her grandmother’s questions. She knew Olenna was about to speak at length and so she held her breath until the tirade was over.

“My dear, we are not safe in this city. No one whose name is not Lannister or Eddard Stark is,” She said softly. “Though we are ‘honoured guests’ as they insist upon calling us, do not think for a single moment that they would not turn on us should it serve their own agenda. Counting Lord Stark as a friend of the Tyrells would ensure the King, at least, would back us should his wolf pup do so.”

She stopped talking as a minor lord and his lady strolled by their section of the garden. Anyone could be a spy for one of the many players here in the capital, and they could not risk a single word of their conversation reaching any of those players.

Her grandmother opened her mouth to resume speaking, but Margaery was feeling bold and decided to beat her to it.

“Grandmother, why have we not yet offered my hand to the crown prince?”

As expected Olenna looked annoyed at being cut off. Margaery thought she would ignore her question and just resume her own line of conversation; thus, she was surprised when the Queen of Thorns answered her.

“Do you want him to be your husband so much, Margaery? Can you imagine him as a gentle and dutiful lover?” She asked already knowing the answer. “No. It is clear from what I have observed and your own reports on your walks with him that he would not be a suitable husband for you, my dear. As much as I want you to be queen, I want you to be safe even more so.”

She was touched by her grandmother’s words. Olenna Tyrell was not known as the most sentimental of women in the Seven Kingdoms, and so receiving such unconditional affection from her was something to be cherished.

This did answer Margaery’s initial question, but now she had many more to ask.

“Then why are we still here in the capital if I am not to be queen?” She asked dejectedly. “This is what I have been prepared for my whole life, yet now we are so close we are to abandon it all because my husband would be unkind. Why?”

Olenna rose slowly to her feet and walked over to the entrance of their little spot, sticking her head out to whisper some instructions to her twin guards before resuming her seat.
“What-“

“A moment, my dear,” Olenna said before she could complete her question.

It was indeed only a few moments later when one of her guards entered their sitting area and gave the briefest nod to Olenna, who turned to Margaery with a conspiratorial smile upon her face.

“I cannot tell you all today, child, for I do not yet know it all myself,” She sounded excited as she spoke, which in turn caused Margaery to emulate her feelings. “Suffice it say that the greatest secret in the Seven Kingdoms is slowly, but surely, being made known to me. That is why we do not act just yet. If the secret turns out to be mere, then we will proceed with a little more protection for you from this beast of a prince. However,” She looked Margaery full in the face as her voice took on a much more serious note. “Should it prove true, then we will follow that particular trail and be done with these royal brats.”

She did not have the faintest idea as to what her grandmother could be referring to. What was this secret? What made it the greatest secret in the entire realm? And how did it fit into Margaery becoming the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms?

All these questions were buzzing around her mind, there was so much to keep track of that she was at a loss of what to ask her grandmother. She did not need to, because Olenna’s voice cut through her spinning mind.

“I know, my dear. I am as confused as you are, as much as I loathe to admit it,” She did indeed sound bitter. “If I had not been given the tiniest of hints as I had been, you would already be betrothed to the crown price and well on your way to becoming queen. As it happens, that might not be the best path for us if what I have been told is indeed the truth.”

“What is it? Tell me all that you know, please,” She stopped to get herself under control. “Please, grandmother, tell me all that you can right now so that I am not at a loss should the wind suddenly shift. Please?” She finished with a hopeful smile that she knew would have no effect on Olenna.

If the Queen of Thorns did not wish to tell her something, no amount of pleading and sweet smiles would change her mind on the matter. She must always trust her grandmother, she had yet to lead her into a situation that caused her harm.

Once again Margaery was surprised when Olenna started to speak more of her cryptic tale.

“That man I met with in Highgarden,” She said cautiously and quietly. "He told me of another side of events. Events that had changed the structure of the entire realm. If this side of events is indeed true, then there will be many changes coming to the kingdoms once more. I intend for us to be on the right side of those changes. I am sorry, my dear, but that is all I can tell you right now.”

She was not expecting to be told very much but she was still disappointed at the brevity of Olenna’s response.

'I only hope this will not be as drawn out as our original plan,' She thought to herself.

Realising that her grandmother would not be persuaded to elaborate further, Margaery decided to return to their reason for being in the gardens in the first place.

"So what is to be done with Lord Stark? If he will not agree to wed-" She stopped as she remembered something. "This plot, this supposed great secret of the realm. It involves them somehow, doesn't-"
"Hush!" Olenna all but yelled, her eyes frantic as they looked around their enclosed space. "Speak no more of that, child. Perhaps I was wrong and your lord father has gifted you some of his stupidity."

She recoiled at her grandmother's words. She had rarely been scolded so harshly; all of Highgarden knew she was Olenna's favourite grandchild. This did not spare her from the sharp tongue of the Queen of Thorns entirely, it seemed.

"I am sorry, my dear. You cannot know how truly dangerous this place could be for us, else you would know better than to speak so carelessly," Olenna sighed as she observed her granddaughter. "As for Lord Stark, we continue as we have been but we shall let Willas do most of the work. He has, as you say, already taken a liking to your brother. That will count for something."

She was still hurt from her grandmother's chastisement, but she knew that lingering in her misery would only anger Olenna more.

"He also seems to have taken a liking to me," She said slowly. "I believe he knows of our intentions to wed me to Joffrey and feels some measure of pity for me. I do not believe the reason he refused the betrothal the King proposed was solely because of his sister's fate."

"Nor do I, my dear," Olenna said with a proud smile. "The only truly convincing thing about that confession was the pain behind his words. He was very clever in not telling us the true reason; had he told us of the crown prince's nature he would have known he had just handed us a weapon to use against him. Oh," Her grandmother chuckled. "He is much more than what I was expecting. Much, much more."

Grandmother had often said that the lords of the northernmost kingdom had little practice in the ways of politics; that their fixation with honour prevented them from being comfortable in such settings. That was not the case with Lord Stark, if his performance as Hand so far was anything to go by.

He had worked favourable terms for the new agreement between the Reach and the capital. He had also done a commendable job in leading the organisation for the King's tourney - even if the affair had ended darkly as her brother nearly lost his life to the Mountain.

No, Eddard Stark was not the pushover they had been anticipating, nor was he the rough northman they had assumed he would be. In many ways he was much more chivalrous, kind and noble than those lords who claimed to be so in the southern kingdoms. If they were all of the same character as their lord, she truly wanted to meet the rest of House Stark.

"What do you think we should do, child?" Grandmother's question brought her out of her wandering mind.

She was startled at being asked so directly for her opinion that it took her a moment to gather her wits.

"If we parade Willas around in front of him too often, he is certain to suspect our intentions," She said slowly as she worked her way through her thoughts. "If he does not already, of course. He seems to hold no resentment towards father being one of the last to surrender to Robert in the rebellion - despite being the one to lift the siege father had upon Storm's End himself. I think that," She began uncertainly but then stopped as she thought it through.

"Go on, dear." Olenna said encouragingly. "What is it?"
"I think I should ask him to accompany me on one of my outings to the city," She replied with more confidence in each word. "He seems to care for the welfare of the smallfolk, much more than anyone else on the Small Council. I could think of some excuse for him to accompany me that he would feel duty bound to accept. That way he can observe me amongst the people, and I can speak of how House Tyrell values charity greatly or some such thing. He is a kind, dutiful man. Let him see our House as the same in that regard."

She finished feeling slightly proud of herself and waited for her grandmother's reply.

Olenna allowed the silence to last just long enough for it to become uncomfortable before she smiled deeply at Margaery.

"I do believe that might work, my dear," She said excitedly. "If nothing else, he would not refuse to escort a lady to a dangerous area of the city if asked directly. Be sure to make the most of this one chance, Margaery - it is likely he will not accept again. He really is more intelligent than I believed any northerner had a right to be."

With that decided, they settled down to enjoy the view some more and finally made a start on the refreshments they had forgotten in their plotting.

Convincing Lord Stark to accompany her into the city had not been difficult.

He already knew of her charity work from one of his many conversations with Willas. It took only the slightest mention of how the Hand of the King's presence alone would give much hope to the smallfolk before he agreed to accompany her.

She was nervous as her litter made its way towards the less than grand streets of the capital. Not because she felt unsafe, she knew the people were starting to love her, but because this was perhaps her only chance to make a truly lasting impression on Lord Stark.

She could hear his voice outside of her litter but could not make out his words. She assumed he was speaking to one of his guards; they all seemed to speak with their lord so easily, unlike most of the servants of the southern lords.

'I will visit the North some day,' She vowed to herself. 'If that frozen kingdom can produce such fine men, it would be refreshing to visit their homeland.'

As her litter stopped and was placed on the ground, she waited for one of her guards to help her out of it. She did not have to wait long as the small door was opened and there stood Lord Stark, ready to aid her.

"We are here, my lady," He said in that solemn voice.

He offered his hand to her and she gladly accepted it as she exited her litter. The sun was much brighter than she had been anticipating and it took her eyes a few moments to adjust to it.

Her smile was automatic as she saw the familiar face of Senna making her way towards her; she could clearly see the squirming bundle in her arms that she knew to be Flynn.

Senna stopped just a few feet away from her and looked nervously up at Lord Stark.

'This would be the first time she has been so close to one of the Small Council, I imagine,' She realised. 'Much less the Hand of the King himself,'
"Senna, this Lord Stark. The Hand of the King," She said with a reassuring smile. "Lord Stark, this is my friend Senna, and that little beauty in her arms is her son, Flynn." She finished her introductions with the smile fixed on her face.

"M'lord," Senna greeted giving her best attempt at a curtsy. "Forgive me approaching, m'lord. Lady Margaery often allows it, y'see."

"Well met, Senna," Lord Stark said with a kind smile. "Think nothing of it. I am here to see what help I can offer you and the rest of the citizens. I have accompanied Lady Margaery as I know she is already well acquainted with many of your neighbours and yourself."

Her smile only grew more genuine as she detected the sincerity in Lord Stark's voice.

With the introductions over she gestured to Senna, who knew immediately what she wanted and placed Flynn in her arms.

"Hello, handsome," She cooed at the babe who babbled in response, giving her that gummy smile she had come to love. "And how are we today?"

"Well enough, m'lady," Senna answered, still nervous at being in the presence of Lord Stark. "Things have improved a lot since you arrived, m'lady."

Flynn babbled some more as if in agreement and Margaery's heart soared at the sound.

"Full of words today, aren't we?" She asked the babe as she tickled his belly. He giggled adorably as his little legs kicked in response.

She was glad to feel the plumpness of his little belly as she tickled him. Senna was also looking much healthier but she still had an air of misery about her that saddened Margaery.

"Perhaps you would accompany Lord Stark and myself as we speak with the people, Senna?" She asked the timid woman. "I am sure we would both feel more safe with this valiant warrior protecting us," She said as she rocked the little one in her arms.

"O-o' course, if your Handship does not mind me doing so," Senna replied nervously looking at Lord Stark.

Yet another smile graced the usually solemn face of the Hand as he answered the woman.

"It would be my pleasure to have you with us, Senna," He turned towards Margaery and peered down at little Flynn. "And I would be foolish to refuse the protection of such a fierce little lad, eh?" He chuckled as he caressed one of Flynn's cheeks with the back of his finger.

Flynn's squirming in her arms grew a little more forceful and Margaery had to tighten her grip on the babe. She wondered what he wanted but then it became obvious as his little hands started to grab at Lord Stark.

"I believe he wants to protect you personally, Lord Stark," Margaery said with a light smile as she looked at the northern lord.

He looked surprised at her words, but then faced Senna with a raised eyebrow.

"Go ahead, m'lord," She replied nervously but firmly. "If the Lady Margaery trusts you with him then so do I."
Her heart fluttered at the trust Senna had for her, she could not help the large smile that formed on her face as she handed Flynn to Lord Stark.

He held the babe perfectly as he cooed down at him, Flynn's adorable giggles filling the gloomy streets. He seemed a little sad as he looked at Flynn's face but it was not enough to hide the joy he was clearly feeling.

"Do you have children o' your own, m'lord?" Senna asked. "If you don't mind me asking, o' course." She added hurriedly.

"I do, Senna. The Gods have blessed me with three sons and two daughters," He said fondly. "I remember when each one of them were the size of your son; I had never known such happiness."

They had started to walk towards the place that served as a community square of sorts. It was there that Margaery had done most of her charity work, it was ideally placed to ensure the orphans and workers alike could access the aid Margaery had offered so readily. She was looking forward to seeing the faces of the little children as she revealed the large amounts of sweets she had brought with her.

'I truly cannot wait to have children of my own,' She thought to herself happily. 'They would be worth suffering under a cruel husband for; though he would not live long if he were cruel to my children.'

That was one thing she was utterly certain of. If she were to marry Joffrey and he ever abused the children they might have, she would not hesitate to remove the threat of him from her little ones. She knew her grandmother would help with this, and Loras would surely wish to swing the sword himself.

Her dark thoughts were interrupted as they arrived at the dilapidated fountain with the steps she had often sat on. The crowd was already beginning to form but, like Senna, most of them hung back at the sight of Lord Stark. They were casting him nervous looks despite the silly faces he was pulling for Flynn's amusement.

Realising that now was the time to start the show, she cleared her throat to catch Lord Stark's attention. She glanced at the crowd once he had met her eyes, and he apparently understood her meaning as he handed a protesting Flynn back to Senna.

She faced the crowd that had formed a little farther away than usual.

"There is no need to be nervous, my friends," She said as she gave her warmest smile to the smallfolk. "The Hand of the King, Lord Stark, has accompanied me here today to discuss how best we might help each and every one of you. He was chosen by the King to serve as his Hand, and he has performed his duties remarkably thus far."

She turned to Lord Stark and with a short nod of her head allowed him to speak. She could not help but smile internally as she noticed how he was appraising her as she had spoken.

"Lady Margaery speaks truly, and kindly." He gave her a short bow. "As she said, my being here today is to learn what the crown can do to improve your lot in life. I know that many of you believe the King might not have your best interests at heart, but I assure you this is not the truth."

She was shocked at his words, but she did not let it show. She simply smiled at the crowd and nodded, playing her part.

"Lady Margaery's kindness has caused many nobles to check their own hearts," He said solemnly.
"I will not offer you false promises and flowery words. This may not be enough to help the realm's more selfish lords to act in charity but," He paused and looked meaningfully at the crowd. "It has already started to make a difference to those of us on the Small Council. Enough from me, I am sure you all much prefer Lady Margaery's voice to mine own." He finished with a light chuckle as he stepped back and looked at Margaery.

She was impressed, there was no denying it. She knew her grandmother would also feel the same when Margaery informed her of what happened here today.

She took her usual seat as the crowd began to approach, she was surprised that Lord Stark had sat down next to her and had joined her in offering the sweets to the children.

'If only there were more lords and ladies like this one,' She thought with a hint of sorrow as she looked at Lord Stark playing with two young boys. 'The realm would be a much better place to raise children.'

It was a few hours later that she and Lord Stark made their way back to where her littler was stationed. Senna was accompanying them with a contented looking Flynn fast asleep in her arms.

The day had gone well. Lord Stark had listened to the people's words and promised to ensure their needs would be met. He assured the people that their time of feeling neglected was at an end. He seemed to be winning over his fair share of people by the time they announced that they would be returning to the Red Keep.

They had arrived at Margaery's litter and as Lord Stark approached his men to ready his horse, Margaery used the opportunity to speak with Senna in private.

"Are you well, Senna? Truly?"

"I am, m'lady, it's just that," She paused and looked guilty at Margaery. "I don't want to seem ungrateful, m'lady, but-"

"Senna, you have nothing to fear from me," She said truthfully. "I count you as a friend, not just a commoner that I find pleasant. You are my friend as much as any noblewoman, more so, in fact. What is it you wish to tell me?"

Senna had reddened at Margaery's word and a lone tear had fallen from her eye that she quickly wiped away.

"The others. They seem to think I am a way to get into your good graces, m'lady," She said shakily. "They're always hounding me to ask you for this or that on their behalf and some get nasty when I refuse, oh no," She added quickly as she caught the look on Margaery's face. "None o' them have dared raise a hand to me, not after how you dealt with that cunt. Apologies, m'lady."

"There is no need to apologise, Senna. He was indeed a cunt," She shared a cheeky smile with the woman before schooling her features. "If others are taking advantage of you in the hopes of gaining something, I will ensure it stops. My grandmother suggested assigning some guards to you - I believe I shall do that. No," She spoke over Senna as she started to interrupt. "I will not be able to rest if I do not know you and this little one are not safe at night. You will have guards and that is the end of it." She smiled once more at the woman. "If I could bring you to the Red Keep, I would. Perhaps I could arrange for you to have a position at Highgarden, if you would like that?"

Her eyes widened at the possibility, but she also looked frightened.

"M'lady, I have no skill that would be of any use to a lord or lady," She said quickly. "I would not
wish to embarrass you, m'lady. I would only let you down."

She knew she should not force the issue with her, so she settled for giving Senna one of her warm
smiles.

"It is something to think about, my friend," She said kindly. "Now, I am afraid I must take my
leave, Senna. I shall visit again as soon as I am able." She bent down to gently kiss Flynn's
forehead, doing her best not to wake him. "I will dispatch guards to you and they will arrive on the
morrow. Anything you need of me, just ask one of them to find me in the Red Keep."

"Thank you, m'lady, truly I'm ever so grateful," Senna said with her voice thick with emotion. She
gave one of her usual half bows and departed for her home.

Margaery watched her and Flynn go sadly, wishing she could take them both back to Highgarden
this night and see them safe and happy.

'One day I will,' She said to herself with certainty. 'I will ensure Flynn grows up in a place much
happier than his own mother had to.'

She made her way over to Lord Stark, whom she realised had been watching the scene with a small
smile.

"Your concern for the wellbeing of the smallfolk is refreshing to see, Lady Margaery," He said
genuinely. "This would be a much less conflicted realm if all were like you."

"Thank you, Lord Hand," She said a little surprised at his words. "I have a particular soft spot for
children. I would love to meet some of your own one day, Lord Stark."

"As I said before, the hospitality of Winterfell would be yours should you ever find yourself in the
North," He said warmly. "My eldest daughter, Sansa, would no doubt fawn over a true southern
lady close to her age. I am sure my sons would also be helpless in the face of your beauty." He
finished with a chuckle as he accepted the reins of his horse from one of his guards.

She smiled at his words. It was pleasant to be speaking with a lord who was so honourable and
sincere with his speech. Even if he was not as clueless as they would have liked, there was no
doubt that honour was important to this man.

'And yet he fathered a bastard,' She remembered Willas mentioning it to her. 'Not even this man is
without a little dishonour then.'

"I am sure your daughter and I would be fast friends, my lord," She said with a smile. "I have no
doubt your sons would be handsome as well, if they look like their lord father," She had to be
careful with her words, knowing they could easily be misconstrued. "Do they favour you or their
mother more? She is a Tully, no?"

"They have more of their mother in them than they do me," He said fondly. "It is only my youngest
daughter, Arya, who has inherited the Stark looks. The rest have the red hair and blue eyes of
House Tully, like their mother." He smiled warmly as he thought of his children.

He had not mentioned his bastard, whom she knew was a boy. Perhaps his shame was so great that
he would rather not speak of him.

'Then why would he raise him alongside his trueborn children?' She wondered as she thought more
on her brother's words.
"Lord Stark," She began carefully. "I wonder if I might ask another personal question of you?"

She had no intention of angering the man, but for some reason she felt a certain need to know of his other son. She had never met the boy and she did not even know his name, but she felt as though she should.

"You may, my lady, though I can save you the trouble. I know what you would ask," He said evenly, not a hint of anger in his voice. "It is true that I also have another son who is not the child of my lady wife," He bowed his head as he spoke, shame was written all over his face.

She was stunned that he would admit it so readily and that he reacted as such. Most lords would respond in anger at the reminder of their dishonourable actions, but Lord Stark only accepted them and offered no excuse.

Her respect for him grew, which shocked her. She had thought the opposite would have happened.

"I am sorry to bring up yet more painful memories for you, Lord Stark," She ventured. "You must think me so rude."

"I do not, my lady," He responded sincerely. "I am surprised that you would ask of my son. It is no secret in the Seven Kingdoms, it seems, though most avoid mentioning him at all." His tone grew bitter as he spoke.

"What is his name, if I might ask?" She said in an attempt to further set herself apart from the rest of the nobles he had met.

"Jon, my lady. I named him for the man who taught me how to be one." He said solemnly.

"Did his mother not wish to name him, my lord?" She asked and regretted it instantly as pain filled his face. "I am sorry, I-"

"There is nothing to apologise for, my lady," He said quickly. "She might have had a name for him, but she died shortly after birthing him." His voice broke as he said these words.

She felt a rush of sympathy for the bastard she had never met. Her own lady mother had almost died birthing her, but Margaery had been fortunate enough to have her mother survive. She did not want to imagine what her life would have been like if Alerie had perished the way this Jon's mother had.

"And whom does he take after, my lord?" She asked in an attempt to lighten the conversation. "You or his mother, like the rest of your children. Besides Arya, of course."

"He is all his mother, though you can see his father in him too, if you know what to look for," He smiled as he spoke. "He is a good man, despite the stigma he has been forced to endure for something that was not his doing. Forgive me, my lady, we should be heading back to the Red Keep before your grandmother marches down to drag us back by our ears," He laughed lightly at his own words, and Margaery found herself joining in.

She could tell he deliberately ended the conversation to avoid more talk of his bastard, and she did not wish to push him. He looked as pained as he did when he had spoken of his late sister.

She returned to her litter and as they made their way back to the Red Keep the rhythmic motion allowed her to focus her thoughts a little.

'He has seen me and my actions today, so that part of the plan is accomplished,' She thought. 'I am
certain he will take note of them and look for the same characteristics in Willas. Hopefully it is enough to open him to the idea of betrothing his daughter to my brother.'

She hoped her grandmother would be pleased with her progress this day. She wanted her to be proud of her granddaughter.

As she fondly recalled all of the babbling and giggling Flynn had filled her ears with, she could not help but think of Lord Stark's bastard, this Jon, whose own mother had died birthing him. She could not imagine little Flynn surviving this long had Senna perished bringing him into this world. Lord Stark had willingly sacrificed his honour by acknowledging his bastard and raising him alongside his trueborn children. Such a thing was not at all common in the Seven Kingdoms, even amongst the more kinder Houses. It was not uncommon for many to simply ignore the fruits of their lust.

'And his father had claimed him a good man, despite all that is said about bastards,' She recalled. 'The North is truly a mysterious place, if the men that call it home are any indication.'

She was grateful to see the Red Keep as they approached, she was exhausted and longed to bathe. She did not like the smells that followed her from the streets, but she would endure them for the chance to help others. She did not think any less of herself for wanting to be rid of the stench, though. None would have to endure it once she was the Queen.

'Assuming this great secret is not made known and the realm does not erupt into chaos,' She thought anxiously. 'I pray grandmother can lead us right should such a thing come to pass.'

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter! I wanted Margaery and Eddard to have an established relationship before Jon and Marge meet. I'm sure my reasons for doing so are obvious, but near with me :)

In the next chapter we shall be returning to the North. It's perhaps the most important chapter I've written since the big reveal of Jon's heritage. Needless to say, I'm nervous about posting it haha

As always, let me know your thoughts on this chapter!
Many thanks to those who show support!
“Dead!”

He could not help but chuckle as Arya let out yet another frustrated growl. Her instructor had caught her for perhaps the hundredth time with his wooden sword.

Jon had never seen a swordsman move the way that Syrio Forel did with a blade in his hand. Despite said blade being made of wood, he had little doubt that Syrio would best most of the guards in Winterfell.

“You cheated! You said left but went right,” Arya was seething. “That was not fair.”

“You know what is not fair, Dead Girl?” Syrio sounded amused, but it was hard to tell with his accent. “Life. A lesson that your lord father need not pay me to teach you. Now, again!”

This went on for another hour before Syrio called an end to their session. Arya had to attend the rest of her lessons with the Septa – a condition her mother had insisted upon if she wished to continue learning the sword.

“You are getting better with every session, little sister,” He said to Arya as she came over to him. “Soon enough, you’ll be thrashing all of us around the yard.”

She grinned at his words and playfully hit his thigh with her wooden sword.

“I do that anyway,” She said amused. “If Ser Rodrik had trained me sooner, I would be the greatest sword in the realm! Like Ser Arthur Dayne!”

The smile that came to his face was automatic, it always was when he was with Arya. Still, he could not help but feel a stab of regret at the mention of the late Sword of the Morning. The man who had died defending him from the man who had raised him.

‘How great of a swordsman would I be now,’ He thought to himself. ‘If I had Ser Arthur Dayne to teach me?’

He would never know, just as the many others who died because of his parents love would never know what their lives would be like all these years later.

He knew that he was innocent of all of that; it was not his choices that had caused the deaths of thousands.

‘It is too late to think of that now,’ He reminded himself yet again. ‘I could not choose to prevent the deaths of those who perished in Robert’s rebellion, but I can choose to save the living world from the wars to come.’

Arya’s voice broke him out of the dread that was always present in his mind these days.

“Oh! Are you listening to me?”

“Sorry, what?” He said with a guilty smile. “I was elsewhere. What did you say?”
She did not reply immediately, she simply looked at him with clear annoyance before her expression softened.

“You do that a lot lately,” She said sadly. “I wish you would tell me what is wrong. Don’t tell me there isn’t anything! I’m not blind, big brother.”

He wanted to tell her everything, but he knew she was not yet ready for the truth. He barely felt able to withstand the new reality himself, he would not subject Arya to the same struggle. Not yet.

It was more than that though - he did not want his siblings to look at him differently.

He knew that Rickon, being so young, wound not truly understand it. The others, however, were old enough to know what it would mean.

He wanted to believe that Robb and Bran would still see him as their brother. He had no doubt that Arya would love him the same as always, once she recovered from the initial shock. He even believed Sansa would be more friendly towards him, if she knew that he was a prince like those in her songs and stories.

He could be completely wrong, and all the Stark children would hate him. They had all grown up believing House Targaryen to be full of madmen and rapists.

A sharp pain brought him out of his mind.

“Seven Hells, Arya!” He gasped, pained and surprised as Arya’s wooden sword bounced off of his shin.

“You did it again, you stupid!” She responded with anger. “Stop ignoring me and tell me what's wrong!”

“Why do you think there is something wrong, little sister?” He asked as calmly as he could, not eager to provoke another attack.

“Because you’re always sulking,” She could not help but smile as she spoke. “Well, more than usual. And you’re either with Ghost in the Godswood or with that Red Woman doing who knows what. Why won’t you tell me what's wrong with you?”

He could not help but laugh loudly as Arya attempted to pout and sulk like a little girl. It was not something she was very good at.

“Oh, shut up.” She huffed but joined him in his laughter. “It works for Sansa with father.”

“Yes, but that does not mean it would work for you,” He replied still chuckling. “Do you think Sansa could wield a sword just because you can?”

Their laughter grew louder as they were both picturing their prim and proper sister in such a way.

“Can you imagine her in breeches and a tunic in the training yard?” Arya asked as she struggled to breathe from laughing.

“We jest now, but I imagine she’d destroy us all if we dared to ruffle one of her pretty dresses,” He said as he attempted to control his own breathing.

Jon allowed himself to get lost in his laughter. His heart felt lighter as he spent time with Arya.

“Young lady, it is time for your lessons,” A voice interrupted their moment. “I shall inform your
lady mother that I had to come and fetch you myself.”

They turned and were greeted by the disapproving face of Septa Mordane. Their laughter renewed as they took note of the person accompanying her.

Sansa was stood a little behind the Septa and was squirming as if the sight of the muddied yard was enough to ruin her precious outfit.

“What?” She demanded, face turning as red as her hair. “What are you laughing at?”

“Girls, there is no time for this. Come, both of you.” Septa Mordane said sternly.

It had no effect as instead of addressing the Septa, Arya replied to Sansa.

“Forgive us, Your Grace,” She said as she bent the knee. “I beg you, let us keep our heads and we shall never laugh again. Perhaps Her Grace could teach us how to be so uptight?”

It was taking all the control Jon had to not erupt into renewed laughter once more. The Septa looked scandalised as he knew she would, and Sansa looked as if she were about to throw one of her rare, but legendary, tantrums.

“You are fortunate I am not to be queen!” She shouted at her sister who was still kneeling. “You would not dare tease me if I could punish you for doing so!”

“Oh, would you punish me harshly, Your Grace?” Arya asked with mock terror as she turned to Jon. “Brother, please save me from this tyrant!”

Jon tried not to laugh. He really did. The combination of Arya’s words and expression, the angry face of the Septa and Sansa stamping her foot proved to be too much.

He laughed. Loudly and truly, he laughed.

Until the Septa dispelled the joyous moment once more.

“How dare you laugh at your betters! You should know your place, boy!”

That stopped him instantly. He looked at the Septa and the pain he felt was instantly replaced with amusement once more.

‘If only she knew,’ He thought to himself as he once more broke out in laughter.

“I will inform Lady Stark of this, you mark my words, bastard!” She spat, her fury rising in response to being the cause of his laughter. “It is long past time that you were stopped from corrupting the Starks! Perhaps now that Lord Stark is away you will finally be-”

She did not get to finish speaking. Arya had covered the distance between her and the Septa and had swung her wooden sword at Mordane’s right arm.

The whole courtyard was silent; even the Septa looked so shocked that she apparently forgot to be in pain. Sansa looked as if Arya had grown wings and the servants around them were staring open mouthed at what just happened.

“Don’t ever talk to my brother that way again,” Arya yelled, unaffected by the audience she had drawn. “He is a Stark, no matter what you say, you dried up old cunt!”

She drew back the wooden sword to strike her again and Jon moved to stop her, but before he had
made it the sword was out of her grip.

“That is enough, Arya Stark,” Syrio said, sounding completely serious for the first time. “There will be no more lessons for you for the rest of the week. Now, go to your mother and tell her of your actions here.”

Jon was expecting Arya to direct her rage at the Braavosi, and so he nearly fainted with shock as Arya wordlessly left the training yard without looking back.

Septa Mordane remembered that she had been struck, and she clenched the arm that would be bruised come the morrow. She looked at Jon with undisguised contempt before nodding in thanks to Syrio and then ushering Sansa and the servants away from the training yard.

Jon was about to follow suit, but he stopped and turned to face Syrio as he started to address him.

“Where are you going, boy?”

He looked at the Braavosi warily, unsure as to why he was asking.

“Away from here, my lord,” He said with a shrug. “It will only be a matter of time before I am called to Lady Stark to explain my side of what just happened.”

“The woman insulted the Dead Girl’s kin, the Dead Girl reacted and then she left. There is nothing more to tell than this,” He said easily. “Her lady mother may be disappointed in her actions, but not so much as Syrio Forel.”

“Why would you be disappointed, my lord?” He was confused. “I assumed you would be proud with how fast she moved today.”

“Anyone can move, boy. It is what they move for that matters,” He started to perform a few complex movements as he spoke. “A warrior is calm as still water. Anger has its place on the battlefield, just so, but here in one’s home it is a weakness. I am disappointed that the Dead Girl acted in such a manner, it is as if I have taught her nothing that truly matters.”

If all of the folk from Essos spoke as strangely as this one, he was certain to never visit there. Jon, like many of the North, preferred simple and direct speech. This was not something that Syrio Forel was able to do, it seemed.

“If rage has a place on the battlefield, why should she not learn to cultivate it?” Despite his manner of speaking, Jon was eager to hear more of Syrio’s thoughts.

“Put four foes in front of Syrio Forel, here and now, he will give you four corpses,” He replied with that strange accent. “Put two friends and two foes in front of Syrio Forel, here and now, he will give you two corpses. And if you should put two friends and two foes in front of Syrio Forel on a battlefield, what will he most likely give you?”

Jon waited for him to finish, believing it to be a rhetorical question. He did not realise Syrio expected an answer until almost a minute passed with his pointed gaze never leaving Jon.

It took him almost another minute to work it out, but he answered at long last.

“Four corpses.”

“Just so,” Syrio nodded with a knowing smile. “And why would Syrio Forel do this?”
“He,” Jon stopped to correct himself. “You would be acting on instinct in the middle of a battlefield, and if rage were to guide those instincts you may not be able to easily tell friend from foe until after,” He answered slowly. “It might help you survive the battle, but it would lose you much more once the dust has settled.”

He did not know if he had answered correctly, but if the smile on Syrio’s face was anything to go by then he had not missed the mark by much.

“Just so, boy,” He said satisfied. “And now, answer my other question. Where are you going?”

“I do not know, my lord,” He answered. “I thought it best to remove myself from the yard after Arya’s outburst.”

“Luckily for you, Syrio Forel knows it is best that you stay here,” He looked at him once more with a knowing smile. “Catch!”

He threw Arya’s confiscated wooden sword at Jon, who caught it as he shot a confused look at the Braavosi.

“What-“

“The Dead Girl must learn from a different teacher for the rest of the week – her own actions,” Syrio said simply as he adopted one of his strange stances. “Syrio Forel is here to teach, and teach he shall.”

“I have no idea how to do this Water Dancing, my lord,” He spluttered. “I would only-“

“I know this, else I would not teach you what you already know,” The Braavosi cut him off. “A true warrior is calm as still water, just so, but when water is not still it is adaptable. Are you, Jon Snow?”

He did not wait for an answer, which was just as well because Jon had none.

“Let us see. Now, we begin the dance!”

With that he rushed forward and Jon knew he was about to be humbled, but as he observed the way the man moved this close, he could not help but feel eager and excited at the thought of possibly being able to himself.

Jon’s first dance lasted for many hours. As he walked back to his chambers, sweaty and exhausted, he could not help but feel elated. Upon reflection, he realised that Syrio had taught him much more than just a few new moves that day - and he was eager to experience a whole weeks worth of such lessons. He knew, without knowing how, that he was meant to learn what the strange Braavosi was ready to teach him.

It was well worth delaying his planned journey to the Wall, if it meant adding more skills to his arsenal. He was certain they would all prove invaluable someday.

They had been on the road for three days, yet Jon still looked back even though Winterfell was far behind them now. He knew he would be back there before long, but this was the first time he had left the castle without any of his family accompanying him.

It was a band of strangers that were joining him on his journey to meet with his great uncle at the Wall. He did not know how he was going to convince Aemon Targaryen that he was truly his kin,
but he hoped Benjen would be able to help him convince the maester.

His last week at Winterfell had been enjoyable, even with the knowledge of his departure hanging over his head. He knew that this was the first of many journeys he would have to make in order to prepare for this great threat, and so he made the most of his time with his siblings before the truth was inevitably revealed to them.

His training with Syrio Forel had been intense. Jon suspected the Braavosi had pushed him harder than necessary and he did not know what to think about that. He was grateful nonetheless and intended to continue when he returned to Winterfell, assuming the man would be willing to take him on as a full-time pupil.

‘Ser Barristan was able to improve my skills dramatically with only a few hours of training,’ Jon thought to himself. ‘I can only imagine what a week of training under another master swordsman has done to them.’ He was proud of his inherent ability with the sword. ‘I wonder which side of my family I owe that to?’

It was getting easier for him to accept who his parents were. That was some progress, but he was still unable to fully accept who he was.

Before he could sink deeper into troubled thoughts, Melisandre’s voice broke him out of his hours long silence.

“My lord, perhaps we should make camp?” She suggested with that tone of reverence she always addressed him with. “Night approaches and we would do well to rest under the protection of the Lord of Light’s warmth – especially as we draw closer to the domain of the Great Other’s champion.”

Looking round, Jon supposed this was as good a place as any to rest for the night. They made slow progress despite only being a party of four, five including his faithful wolf. This was mostly because of the cart that was carrying their supplies plus Melisandre’s brazier and the dragon egg.

He was still fascinated every time he laid eyes on the egg, but that fascination was now joined by a sense of weariness as he knew what he would be expected to do tonight.

Melisandre had suggested that he should offer his blood to the egg. He had refused outright; he wanted no part of blood magic. Melisandre did not relent, insisting that it was the will of her God that Jon hatches the dragon. Eventually, he agreed to try but would not do so again if it had no effect on the egg.

So, he cut his finger as carefully as he could and allowed his blood to trickle onto the dragon egg. He had not been expecting anything to happen at all, he felt it was a waste of time and his own blood.

How wrong he was.

As soon as the first drop touched the obsidian shell, the veins of purple and white momentarily pulsed more brightly than Jon had ever seen since first laying eyes on the egg. And so, giving his blood to it became a nightly occurrence. Jon had wondered how he would be able to explain his constantly bandaged hands and arms but he need not have worried for no matter how deeply he cut himself at night, there would be not a trace of it on his skin by the time he rose the next day.

This was not the strangest result, however. What was most strange was the voice that would sometimes sweep through his mind. It was not really a voice in the normal sense; more like
thoughts and feeling that he somehow knew the meaning of instantly as if they were his own.

The most common feelings he felt were impatience and anger; as if the dragon in the egg was eager to be hatched. The thoughts that crossed his mind most of all were of open skies and stars so bright they almost hurt to look at.

He could not explain how he knew, but he was certain that the dragon was very much alive and aware of itself inside the egg – no matter how cold it always seemed to be. He could not explain, however, why he was sharing its thoughts and emotions nor how it even had any thoughts and emotions in its current state.

He only hoped that his uncle at the Wall would be able to help him make sense of all this.

They had tied their horses to the nearest trees, Melisandre having detached her own from the cart it was pulling. Garret and Maro started to clear an area for them to set their sleeping furs on. Melisandre and Jon collected those furs and the brazier and egg from the cart.

Melisandre lifted her large brazier off the back of the cart as if it were merely a candle holder. It always unnerved him to see a woman, tall though she was, clearly displaying a level of strength beyond most of the men he knew.

Apparently, Jon himself possessed some measure of unnatural strength, if Garret was to be believed. The first time Jon had lifted the covered egg to carry it to the cart back at Winterfell, he had noticed Garret looking at him with his mouth hanging wide open. When Jon had asked him, he had told him that even Melisandre had struggled with the egg at times, yet Jon was able to carry it as though it weighed nothing – which to him it did.

Melisandre had attributed it to him being destined to ride the dragon inside, but he had not allowed that to enter his mind beyond the initial excitement of seeing the world from the skies.

‘I know nothing of training a dragon, I doubt even the old Targaryen at the Wall truly does,’ He thought to himself a little sadly. ‘It has been over a century since dragons had roamed the skies. Perhaps this egg will never hatch at all.’

He placed it in the brazier as he had done every night they had been on the road, and he waited for Melisandre to finish her nightly prayers to her God.

He had never felt the urge to join them in their worship, but he could not deny the difference the flames and Melisandre’s chanting made to the ever-present dread in his heart.

Once she and Garret had finished their worship, Jon rose and approached the brazier, taking out his knife as he did so. He pressed the blade against his forearm and pulled it down as he held it over the fire. The egg pulsated and hummed as soon as his blood touched the shell and Jon could feel the almost familiar sensation of power wash over him. Once the egg had had its fill, he returned to sit on his furs with the others gathered around the brazier.

“Any change, my lord?” Melisandre asked him as he settled himself.

“None. I would have thought the sensation would grow less intense over time, but it is still almost overwhelming.”

Melisandre only nodded before turning her gaze to rest on the egg in the roaring flames.

“I feel much the same way no matter how many women I take to my bed,” Maro jeered with his usual laugh. “Won’t find me complaining it’s still as intense as if it were my first time.”
Garret cringed next to him but said nothing. His gaze focused on the dragon egg just like Melisandre.

Maro did not share their beliefs entirely, or he was not as devout in his beliefs, Jon did not know which was closer to the truth. He was a gruff man and blunt, almost always coming across as rude to the more uptight but Jon had taken a liking to him.

“Not that you’d know anything about it, eh boy?” He shot at Jon with a playful smirk.

Jon could feel his face redden and hoped it was not visible in the light of the fire.

“All those years growing up in a castle and you’ve never-“

His words stopped abruptly as Ghost had shot to his feet, hackles raised and teeth bared in his silent snarl. It was not directed at Maro, however, but towards the spot where they had tethered their horses.

They all stood and followed the direction his wolf was looking in. At first, they could see nothing but their horses, though they could tell that they were also spooked. None of them could see anything past the first line of trees, but Ghost was still on edge so none of them relaxed.

He was just about to suggest that they move a little closer when he first spotted movement just behind the tree Garret had tied his horse to.

“There, behind that-“ He managed to get out before he lost his voice.

Four figures came out of the treeline, one of them hung back a little as the other three moved to close the distance.

“That’s close enough, friend,” Maro warned as he drew his blade. “Those are our horses and you seem able enough to walk. Carry on, and there needn't be any trouble.”

The three men closest to them were all large and stocky, the heavy furs they were wearing only added to their bulk. The figure at the back looked to be slighter but was also wearing thick furs. Jon suspected that the three facing them were to distract them whilst the fourth made off with a horse, or at least untie them so they could all make off with one each.

He drew his own blade as the three took a few more steps towards them. Despite all his previous thoughts of how talented he was with a sword; he was terrified at the possibility of fighting for real. He had to force himself not to shake as he stood there with his companions, hoping that it would not have to come to violence.

“You southerners and yer words,” The man in the middle said. His accent was northern, but it was rougher than any Jon had heard. “Their our horses now, and we’ll be taking the rest o’ yer stuff. Might even take the woman, too.” He finished with a leer at Melisandre.

When Jon glanced at her, he saw that she was not watching the events that were unfolding. She seemed unconcerned, as her gaze was solely fixed on Jon. This did not do much for his nerves, but before he could suggest she flee he found his attention snapped back to the situation.

All three of the men drew their weapons and charged with roars that caused Jon to almost soil himself. He stumbled backwards a few steps to clumsily check the blow of the man who had rushed him. He could tell that his opponent was not the most skilled of fighters judging by how much of his weight he put behind his first blow, but his ferocity and Jon’s own fear gave him the advantage.
As he swung once again for Jon’s throat, he reacted purely on instinct and stopped the blade with his own but before Jon could even think of countering, he found himself winded and flat on his back. His opponent had drove his foot powerfully into Jon’s stomach and it was all he could do to gasp for air. He heard the man approach him and knew what was coming, and that he was powerless to stop it.

He saw the man who would be his end raise his blade, but before he could swing it his roar of triumph turned into a yelp of surprise as a white blur collided with him and sent him to the ground.

Ghost had charged the man who attacked Jon and as he struggled to his feet, he caught sight of his usually calm wolf tearing the throat out of his opponent.

He felt sick. He had never seen a man killed so brutally. None of the executions he had witnessed could have prepared him for this sight, nor the gurgle of his former opponent as he bled out on the cold ground.

He was brought out of his horrified daze as he noticed a shadow move towards his wolf. One of the other men had witnessed his companion's death and charged forward, intent on bringing his blade down on the wolf that had savaged his ally.

"NO!" Jon roared as he burst forward.

He blocked the downward swing that would have cleaved Ghost's head off and pushed his new opponent away from his snowy white friend.

The fear fell away from Jon as thoughts of fire and rage filled his mind, he knew the dragon in the egg was aware of the skirmish and its feelings gave Jon courage. This, combined with his own fury at nearly losing his wolf, was enough for Jon to allow his instincts to guide him.

As his new opponent swung his sword at Jon's midsection, he checked it and countered by thrusting his blade towards his attacker's chest. The man was fast enough to evade the thrust and used the distance to bring his superior reach into the fight. Jon easily dodged his flurry of strikes and waited for the opening he knew would come. All else around him faded as he lost himself in the thrill of combat, his senses alive and his body flooded with that same surge of power he got from the dragon egg.

Eventually, the opening came. As the man, frustrated at his dancing target evading all of his blows, charged forward in an attempt to impale Jon, he sidestepped and brought his blade up in an arc that almost severed his opponent's hand. The man dropped his blade and Jon finished his attack by stepping out to the side and aiming a strike at his opponent's legs.

The man was on his knees due to his strike cutting him to the bone and Jon allowed himself to take a deep breath.

In that split second he took note of the scene around him; Maro had just lopped the head off of the remaining attacker, whilst Garret was grappling with the one who had remained with the horses. He was not sure who was faring better but before he could look closer, a roar of desperation had caught his attention.

His opponent had drawn a knife from within his furs and attempted to thrust it into Jon's belly. Jon reacted instinctively and stepped back and thrust his own blade forward.

It pierced the the face of his would be killer and did not stop until almost half of the blade was buried in the man's face.
His sword was ripped from his grasp as his opponent collapsed dead on the floor. Jon's blade sticking out of the back of his head and a shocked expression on what remained of his face.

The entire world was silent as he looked down upon the man who had been so intent on ending his life. Jon could not think of feeling victorious for surviving first true fight.

He could not think of the fear that had almost prevented him from defending himself.

He could not think of the rage that had seized him at seeing his wolf almost killed.

All he could think of was that he had ended this man's life.

He was now a killer.

He thought he would feel a sense of righteous accomplishment after slaying his first foe; believing then that it would have been in service to the realm. His duty. That was not how it happened.

This man had died because he tried to kill Jon and his companions for their possessions. He had killed this man, not for duty, but for survival.

He thought of the mother that was never far from his mind as he looked down at his first kill.

'This man was also someone's son,' He said to himself. 'He had memories of his own, but now he has nothing. Not even his life - for I have taken that from him.'

Realisation and shame hit him full force. If he had not left Winterfell, none of these men would be dead. Jon would not be a killer.

He looked about the scene that had been silent since his blade had pierced his assailant's face.

Garret had managed to subdue the fourth member of the attacking group.

Maro was rifling through his own opponent and did not look remotely ashamed as he patted the corpse's furs.

Melisandre was stood in the same spot she had been in before the fight ensued. She was looking at Jon so intensely he felt as if he would burst into flames.

"The first time is never easy, my lord," She said suddenly without emotion. "Yet you succeeded."

Succeeded? He had achieved nothing but murdering a man he had never met. Yes, he would have died if he had not acted but that did nothing to ease the shame Jon was feeling.

He was not sure he could speak, but before he could truly attempt to do so he was rendered speechless for certain as a cold, hopeless sensation washed over Jon.

Not what you imagined, hmm? Did you think you could live a life in this world without paying for it with those of your fellow men? Foolish little boy.

He thought he had become accustomed to the voices of his Gods in his mind, but he knew this was not them. This voice was as ancient as the Old Gods, but it carried none of the warmth that their voices did. Jon felt it as much as he heard it, as if his entire body was slowly freezing and his spirit being torn apart by icy hands.

He tried once more to speak, to plead with his companions to aid him. He would have even begged Melisandre to place him in the fire with the dragon egg, so cold was he. His voice was gone, and
his life would soon follow as he struggled to draw breath. A sense of doom washed over him as the voice once more ripped through his entire being.

You get your first taste of battle, of blood, and this is how you react? Oh, I am disappointed, little one. You have made me an oathbreaker. Must you shame me as you did your uncle's name and House? I promised my champion a worthy opponent, and yet all I have to give him is you. This will not do, oh no it will not, little one. Whatever am I going to do with you? Hmm, I know.

This time Jon knew his spirit was being torn from his body as he was painfully pulled back into that darkness where his Gods had brought him.

The darkness was the same as before, but it felt wrong. Instead of the all-encompassing nothingness of before, this time he was all too aware of the weight of his shame, fear and hopelessness crushing his spirit in this void.

Not as comfortable as your first visit, eh boy?

He tried to summon that white fire as he did before, but nothing erupted in front of him. No matter how hard he tried to focus on picturing those white flames, the darkness remained unbroken as the most chilling laugh he had ever heard filled the void.

Did you think your little tricks would work here? There are none of my siblings to aid you now. No uncles and memories of mothers to give you courage. Hmm, oh yes. That bag of meat was not your first kill was it? Oh no, this was.

The darkness gave way and he found himself in that same room he had seen his mother hand him over to his uncle. Only this time it was his mother and two women surrounding her.

Lyanna Stark was screaming in agony, blood already drenching the sheets and her dress and even the dresses of her midwives. After what seemed like hours, a cry joined Lyanna's own as one of the women stood up with a babe covered in his mother's blood in her arms.

I admit, of all the ways you feeble things can expire, this is one of my favourites. A mother, full of hope and love for the child she carries, being ripped from life by that very same babe.

The scene changed and he was looking down upon his mother as she lay in the bloodied bed, eyes closed with a peaceful expression upon her face. He wished so much he could reach out and touch her, but he had no body in this void. All he could do was look at the woman whose life he had taken just to be here.

'I was born a killer,' He said to himself, knowing it was true. 'That man was not my first kill, my mother was. It is my fault that I never knew her. Never felt her embrace nor heard her living voice with my own ears.'

Oh, your poor child. You wish to speak with your mother? Even I am not so wicked to deny you that, little one.

Lyanna's eyes shot open, they were no longer grey but a hauntingly deep blue. She looked at where Jon was viewing the scene from and her mouth opened in a scream.

"You killed me! You killed me! I loved you from the moment I knew you were in my belly," Her voice was shrill and cut Jon deeper than any blade. "Why? Why did you take my life? I loved you! And you killed me!"
'No, no!' He tried to say desperately. 'Please, I am sorry. Please, please, just let this stop. PLEASE!'

Is this not what you wished for, little one? Is my gift of seeing your mother not enough? Well, I will not have it said that I am not a generous host.

"My son," A voice spoke as a man suddenly appeared beside Lyanna.

He knew it was his father. The hair and the features he had given Jon were the same as when he had seen him in his previous visit. This time, Rhaegar's eyes were the same blue as Lyanna's and he wore his black armour and the breastplate was caved in, the blood trickling from his mouth as he looked at his son.

"You were supposed to save the living world, my son," His father spoke with a voice so melancholic it hurt. "Yet your first act was to kill your mother. How can you save the lives of others? Not even the life of the woman who birthed you was safe from you."

'I was a babe,' He screamed in an attempt to tell his parents. 'If I could take it back, I would! All of it!'

Yet things do not work that way, little one. I must confess, I thought you would be happy with this reunion. I have allowed you to speak with your parents, unlike my siblings who would only let you watch the past. Yet this is still not enough for you, is it? You are the same as all of your kind, so full of avarice you cannot be grateful. Oh, how foolish of me. This little family is not quite complete yet, is it? My apologies.

Whatever was left of Jon was broken as the two newcomers appeared suddenly on the bed.

The little girl looked pale despite her complexion. Her dress was stained blood and torn with what were clearly stab wounds. She looked at him with those same blue eyes that had no depth and a frightened expression as she leaned against their father's legs.

The babe was silent, Jon did not have to suffer his expression of fear and pain because he had no head - at least not enough for his face to be discernible. He lay against Lyanna, his arms still waving through the air despite being so clearly dead.

'No, please stop this. Just stop it all,' He pleaded with the entity that had brought him here. 'Let me be with them, please. Let me die for them. Let me join them.'

You believe yourself worthy of joining them? You? What makes you think they would want you? How many others had to die so that you could be born? How are you worthy of peace when all you have brought to your world is chaos and death? Hmm. Perhaps I have chosen the wrong champion to represent me. You are more suited to serve me than you are my siblings. You know it, in the deepest recesses of your spirit, you know this is the truth. Give in, little one. Give yourself to me and all this can end. Leave the world to my champion. He will bring peace to all. Give yourself to me and I will truly reunite you with your family. Would you not prefer that to all of the misery and pain awaiting you?

He wanted to accept. He wanted to atone for the actions that had killed his family and thousands of others. He wanted to see his parents and siblings alive and whole.

'How could I have defeated The Night King? I could barely defeat a desperate man.'

Yes, you would have failed. Give yourself to me, child.

'Why should I die painfully when I can just fade away, here and now?'
Why should you? You have known enough misery and pain. You need not be alone again, little one. Only give all that you are to me. There is no reason to fight. You would only delay the inevitable.

'Why fight the inevitable? I would have died at the hands of The Night King. I am no promised prince. I am no king. I am nothing.'

Nothing. Yes, that is what you are in the living world. Give yourself to me and you will be a king in my domain. Give in.

He was about to surrender. He was about to give himself over to this entity but then, before he could say the words, thoughts of his family filled his mind. He thought of Arya's face twisted in grief. Robb's tears falling freely as he pulled at his hair in pain. He saw Sansa, Bran and Rickon all weeping on the floor. He saw Eddard and Catelyn, their faces broken in grief.

'No, I am not nothing,' He said to himself slowly. 'I am loved. My family loves me. I love them. I am loved.'

No, they only pretend to because they fear the judgement of their Gods. They would cast you out if they knew they would not be condemned for such an act. I will be your family.

'No, you are lying,' He shook himself out of the trance. 'I will not give in! The only thing I will give you is my blade!' He did not know where his sudden bravery had come from.

Petulant child! So be it. End Him.

The scene changed once more and Jon was back in that same void. The souls of the lost milling around him and he knew before he saw it that The Night King was there. It was much closer than it had been before, and as it reached out to grab him, Jon knew that there was no escape.

His loved ones once again flashed in his mind. Arya, Bran, Robb, his mother, Ghost.

Ghost.

Jon latched on to the memory of his direwolf, who had grounded him so many times when he was adrift in chaotic memories.

He felt the presence of his silent companion reach him in the void and Jon could feel the power that came with it.

He met the eyes of The Night King and, as before, called upon that white fire to repel it. This time, however, when the flames erupted they did not blast The Night King away.

They engulfed it and the creature's mouth opened in a silent scream before it shattered into countless pieces of ice.

The entity let loose a terrible scream of frustration, but Jon knew what he had to do so suddenly, it was as if he had always known.

He summoned that white fire that had once again saved him, but instead of willing it to fill the void - he pulled it inwards until he could feel himself brimming with power. It was as he felt it reach its peak that he willed himself out of this void and away from this evil God. The light of his inner fire permeated the darkness so completely.

His eyes shot open and all he could see, as he breathed for what felt like the first time in his life, was those same white flames surrounding him.
As they started to recede, as if slipping back into his body, he took note of the weight that was almost crushing him and raised his head to look down and almost passed out again from shock.

Staring back at him were a pair of purple eyes with streaks of white. They were definitely not human eyes; they were shining like stars in the night sky.

'Gods, what have I done?' He thought in awe. He reached out tentatively to be sure it was real.

His hand made contact with the scaly neck that was as cold as the ground he was laid on, and he felt the creature hum in response to his touch. The weight on his body shifted as it raised its head to the sky and it opened its mouth to pierce the night with a sound not heard in over a century.

The dragon's screech should have filled him with fear, it certainly hurt his ears being this close to it, but all he could feel was hope. Hope and a sense of freedom.

It was as he felt the wet nose of his loyal wolf that Jon truly understood what all of this meant. He was alive and aware, with his white direwolf at his side and his black dragon sprawled over his body. And this was how it was supposed to be.

He is not a bastard. He is not nothing.

He is a Stark. A wolf.

He is a Targaryen. A dragon.

Now, finally, he is complete.

Chapter End Notes

I did not plan for this chapter to be so long, but I allowed myself to be swept away whilst writing it and hopefully it is not too much!

I know a lot happened in this chapter, and I hope it did not feel rushed to any who read it. That was not my intent.

So, Jon has killed his first man. He has 'met' The Great Other and the dragon has been hatched! If it feels a little anticlimactic, worry not for I intend on writing the whole scene from Melisandre's POV.

I feel I should point this out: Jon does NOT have a super healing factor, his wounds healing so fast is only because of his reason for inflicting them. It will all be explained in a later chapter :)

I'm eager to hear your thoughts on this! What could I have done better? I was so nervous about posting this. Feedback is always appreciated!
Melisandre has seen many things in her four centuries of life.

None of those things equalled the wonder that was unfolding before her very eyes, however.

She knew that making their camp here this night would prove eventful, though she did not know how it would prove to be so. She looked into the flames after speaking with the Lord’s champion, and what she saw in them confused and unnerved her, but she knew she must not interfere as the men exited the treeline and launched their attack on her companions.

She herself had no fear of them. If they had attempted to harm her, Melisandre would have called upon her Lord to defend her and if he had not – then she would have known her time in this world was at an end. She would have gladly accepted it, her spirit so weary despite the eternal strength of her body.

She stood back and observed the Lord’s champion as the song of steel replaced the silence of the night. He was afraid, that much was obvious, but it was more than that. He looked as though he would faint at the sight of his wolf savaging the one who would have killed him, but the moment said wolf was in danger – he reacted.

There was no trace of the fear he clearly felt facing his first opponent. This time there was only fury and determination and he made quick work of his new foe. His mistake, his foolish mistake, was not going straight for the kill. She knew Jon believed his foe to be beaten and so he relaxed his guard and Melisandre felt fear for the first time that night as the man drew a knife and lunged at her Lord’s champion.

Fortunately, Jon was not as unaware as he appeared to be. He reacted faster than she would have believed, and she felt a surge of triumph as her Lord’s champion claimed his first life. Admittedly, it was brutal, and so she was not surprised at the look of utter horror that had dawned upon his face.

She knew enough of Jon to realise that he already regretted his actions, despite knowing full well he would be dead had he not defended himself.

R’hllor’s will had been done that night. His champion had slain his first foe and that was an important rite of passage for any hero. Regardless of what the stories and songs said, there were no heroes in all of history who could claim themselves bloodless.

As Jon looked at her with shame and regret evident on his features, she felt the need to provide comfort and counsel to her charge. She was silent for a moment as she thought of the right words to say.

“The first time is never easy, my lord,” She said, aware that her tone was unfeeling. “Yet you succeeded.”

She did not know what else to say in that moment, but she knew instantly that it was not what Jon needed to hear.

As she began to think once more about how best to counsel him, he opened his mouth with the
beginnings of anger upon his face and so she readied herself for his reaction.

And then fear truly entered her spirit as the budding anger was replaced by abject terror on Jon’s face. His eyes were wide, he was struggling to draw breath, staring wildly around in search of aid. She made towards him, intent on doing all she could to save Jon from whatever had a grip on him, but before she had even closed half of the distance between them a voice stopped her in her tracks.

_Do not interfere. This he must do alone. You will know when it is time to act._

‘What is this?’ She asked the Old Gods. Centuries of visions preparing her for their voices in her mind. ‘How do you speak with me outside of your sacred wood? Why does my Lord not speak with me?’

_This land is a part of our domain, servant of R’hllor. We can reach you more directly than he can in this place. Be ready. Too soon and all is lost. Too late and all is lost. If all is done as it should be, a life will begin in this place where others have ended. Be ready._

Despite the assurances of these foreign Gods, she could not help but whimper internally as the Lord’s champion fell to the ground. She could see his eyes were completely white and knew that his spirit was in another realm.

“No!” She shouted at Maro and Garret who made towards Jon. “Do nothing, it must be this way!”

They immediately stopped and looked at her with the same fearful, confused expressions but they made no further attempt to reach their companion on the ground.

She did nothing to deter the wolf from approaching Jon, she knew it would be futile as the loyal beast licked at his master’s face and tilted his head in confusion. Melisandre knew that the wolf would be whining were it not for his unnaturally silent disposition.

“What the fuck is going on?” Maro asked attempting to sound calm. “What’s wrong with him?”

“I do not know, only that it must be this way.” Melisandre replied, aware that her usual mysterious tone was gone. “We must not interfere until the Lord has given us a sign.”

“What sign, my lady?” Garret asked, fear obvious in his voice. “How will we know if it is truly the Lord’s sign?”

She did not know that either, but she knew she could not admit as much. Garret was a firm believer but Maro was looking as if he was about to pick Jon up off the ground and attempt to rouse him.

“We will know.” She replied with forced calm. “Until then, we must watch and be ready.”

Silence fell upon the scene as she finished speaking. Not one of them moved, besides the white wolf which had started to pace around his master in clear agitation.

Melisandre’s mind was much less quiet. Fear was coursing through her every thought. She did not know what the champion was facing but she knew it was not his own Gods nor hers. She did not want to think of which God he might be with now, but the longer Jon spent on the ground, the less she doubted just who had pulled his spirit out of this realm.

The longest silence Melisandre had ever endured was broken by a gasp from Garret and Maro.

“My lady-“ Garret croaked as she faced him.
So intent had she been on the Lord’s champion that she had not noticed the brazier holding the dragon egg. Following the shocked gazes of her companions, her heart was filled with renewed hope as she observed the flames.

They were not the same orange-red flames that she had lit for her nightfire. These were the purest white she had ever seen. They made her think of the fur of Jon’s wolf and that gave her an idea.

She approached the brazier and made to lift the untainted dragon egg from the white blaze, but as her hands made contact with the flames she recoiled in shock and pain.

It was not that she was burned exactly, her hands were as whole as they had always been, but she had certainly felt a searing agony as her skin touched those roaring flames.

‘What is this?’ She despaired. ‘I have blessed this fire myself; the Lord would never harm me with its touch.’

This had always been true but as she attempted to once again remove the egg from the white flames her attention was drawn back to Garret and Maro.

“Woman, his eyes,” Maro sounded terrified. “What the fuck is going on with his eyes?”

She rushed over to Jon on the ground and peered more closely at his eyes. Horror threatened to consume her as she saw the pure white were slowly filling with flecks of blue.

‘The Great Other,’ She realised with terror. ‘He is corrupting the Lord’s champion.’

She felt desperate and afraid, once again she turned to gaze into the flames that were now white, pleading for an answer from her God. It was as she peered into the fires that a thought occurred to her.

‘Jon repelled the Great Other's champion with white fire,’ She remembered. 'It saved him from the Great Other's influence then, so why not now?’

Turning to look at Jon, she could see that malignant blue continue to fill the eyes of her charge, and as she looked back to the blazing white fire it suddenly made sense.

‘He has been giving his blood to the egg, perhaps he has been giving his power to it also?’ She wondered. ‘Is this why he is susceptible to the corruption this time, because he doesn't have protection he did before?’

Knowing that time was running out; the blue that was filling the eyes of the Lord’s champion making it all too clear, she returned her gaze to the brazier to peer into the flames.

‘Lord of Light, I beg of you to grant me the strength to bear these flames,’ She pleaded with her God. ‘I know not what to do and your champion is falling to The Great Other.’

Her eyes began to water as she kept her gaze fixed on the flames. Her relentlessness paid off as a form began to flicker in the fire before her eyes.

It was Maro.

The crass, decadent ship captain who had brought her to this land was being shown to her by her God.

‘But why?’ She thought desperately. ‘What am I missing? Why Maro?’
And then she remembered that certainty she had felt on the deck of the ship.

‘He has been touched by a God, but not mine own,’ She recalled, excitement growing.

She turned to Maro whose gaze was torn between the unconscious man on the floor and the roaring white flames surrounding the dragon egg.

“Maro,” She was relieved to hear the calm in her voice once more. “You must remove the egg from the fire.”

“You fucking-“ He stumbled over himself. “Do I look like a fucking wizard? What good will burning to death-“

“You must! I know not which God you have crossed paths with, but this is something you must do. Only you can do it. The Lord has shown me.”

He did not look convinced, but she knew her words about his encounter with a god had shook him. So he slowly made his way towards the brazier, the fear was evident on his face but as he held a hand over the white flames a look of confusion joined it.

“There's no heat,” He whispered. “What is all this, woman?”

“I do not-“ She started to say but stopped as she once more recoiled in pain.

She had attempted to hold her own hand over the flames, but the heat was very much there. She did not know how Maro could not feel it but she knew that was not important right now.

“It must be you. Lift the egg and place it upon the champion,” She instructed. “Quickly now, there is not much time.” She urged him as she looked to see the blue that almost filled Jon’s eyes.

“Oh, for fuck sake-“ Maro took a deep breath and then roared as he plunged his arms into the brazier and hefted the egg out. His roar came to an abrupt end as he looked at the blazing egg in his arms. "What the fuck-"

Melisandre gasped in awe as she saw the egg had been the source of the white flames all along. The fire still licked the black egg even as Maro struggled towards Jon with it. The white flames did nothing to Maro nor his attire, it was as if there were no fire at all. It looked as though he was carrying a small boulder as he dropped the egg beside the Lord's champion.

“It'll crush him if I roll it onto it him,” He panted as he looked back at Melisandre, she could see the blood that had poured from his nose with the effort of moving the egg. “If it doesn't, by some miracle, will it burn him?”

“I do not know,” She answered uncertainly. “But it is the Lord’s will. And the egg is weightless to him. It must be done.”

He did not look reassured but nonetheless he rolled the egg on to Jon’s chest. It covered almost his entire upper body.

The flames died as soon as the egg made contact with the unconscious form that was the Lord’s champion. Fear gripped Melisandre so tightly that she could scarcely breathe.

Just as she fell to her knees to beg her Lord to intervene, she was struck dumb and Maro shot away from Jon’s body with a yell.
The moment the white wolf touched its nose to Jon's chest, a blazing white fire had erupted, not just from the egg this time but from Jon himself. It roared and rose ever higher into the sky. It lit up their surroundings so strongly as it engulfed man, wolf and egg, it looked as if day had replaced night.

They all exclaimed in awe as a thunderous crack reached their ears from within the raging flames. They could see nothing, not even shadows of movement within the inferno, but they all knew what had happened.

It seemed as if an eternity passed before another sound reached them through the white flames. The sound of desperate breaths being drawn caused relief to wash over Melisandre.

Before she could begin to wonder whether Jon’s breath was so hitched from pain because of the flames, they had already started to die down. No, it was as if they were moving back into his body.

“By all the Gods,” Garret whispered in awe as the brightness dimmed and they could once more see the man on the ground.

He was not alone. Resting on top of him where the egg had been only minutes before, peering intently into his now normal eyes, was a creature that had not been seen in the world for almost two hundred years.

As Jon slowly raised a hand and placed it upon the neck of the dragon straddling him, it reared back and raised it's head to the sky and let out a piercing screech.

Once it had settled and returned it's gaze to Jon, he began to slowly return to his feet. His loyal wolf beside him to help, taking no notice of the dragon that had finally loosed itself from Jon's body.

If Melisandre had not already been on her knees, she would have fallen to them as she took note of the man before her.

Not even his clothes bore any damage from the white fire that had only minutes ago engulfed him, neither did the wolf nor the ground on which they had burned. He looked stronger than ever, the power radiating from him was felt by them all.

"The Last Hero, Azor Ahai," She intoned with reverence as Garret joined Maro and herself on the ground. "You are reborn."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure how I did with the dragon hatching, but I hope it didn't disappoint! I didn't want to do the whole funeral pyre thing, I wanted to add my own spin on the hatching and had many ideas about doing that but I settled on this one! I hope it wasn't too outlandish even for a fantasy fic.

Yes, Maro cusses like a sailor when he is scared/stressed, which he actually is... a sailor, I mean haha.

I kept this chapter short because I felt Jon rising from an inferno of his own making was the perfect spot to end it.

I have decided on a name for the dragon and it'll be revealed in the next Jon chapter :)
I'm eager (and nervous) to hear your thoughts on this!
‘I am never travelling again,’ Tyrion thought miserably as he walked up the stairs to his rented room.

He would arrive at King’s Landing on the morrow after so much time on the road. He had not been the best of travel companions to his men, so he must think of some way of making it up to them.

‘Gold usually works,’ He said to himself. ‘At least, it does with men outside of the North.’

Besides complaining, shouting at his men and drinking all the wine he could find, Tyrion spent the entire journey south going over all that had happened in the northern kingdom.

From his arrival at Winterfell to his journey to the Wall and then to his meeting with Lady Stark.

He had been humbled more than he would care to admit, he’d been forced to accept that he was not always the smartest man in any given room.

First, the old Targaryen at the Wall had left him speechless and disarmed Tyrion’s arguments against a threat that could only exist in myths. He had left the Wall believing that once a great evil had walked the land – but he did not believe it was still doing so now, even beyond the Wall.

His return to Winterfell was not as welcoming as he would have liked, and he originally assumed it was because the Starks wanted time to adjust to their new situation with Lord Stark in the capital. It was clear that this was not the case as soon as he spoke with the Lady of Winterfell herself. Careful observation was enough for him to deduce that something had changed within Winterfell, though he could not pinpoint it no matter how much he tried to.

It was not just his failure at learning anything useful that had humbled him, but also the way the Starks had dealt with him once he had been discovered. Above all, he was grateful. Grateful that they judged him as a man, not as a dwarf or an abomination, but as a man. Never had this level of respect been given to him without it being paid for in some way. Despite being grateful to the Starks, he was also more than a little displeased with them.

One of the first things he was to do when he reached the capital was to present himself to Lord Stark, so he may inform the northman of his transgressions whilst a guest at his home. He was not looking forward to this. No matter how many times he imagined himself confounding the wolf lord with his clever wordplay, or casually mentioning his father’s name, he knew that he was not going to walk away from that meeting a happy man.

He had already underestimated the Starks and their intelligence; he would not make that mistake again.

‘Lady Stark proved herself to be quite sharp,’ He thought as he climbed into his bed for the night. ‘She was good and cautious with her words, but she was not as subtle as she no doubt believed herself to be.’

It was his meeting with the Lady of Winterfell that had Tyrion convinced something was going on there. That still did not bring him any closer to discovering what that might be, however. A part of him suspected that perhaps the Lady of Winterfell had taken a lover to warm her bed during her
husband’s absence, but he quickly dismissed that idea. He knew Catelyn Stark resented her husband for his own sordid affair, but she would never risk besmirching her Tully honour for something as simple as pleasure.

Thoughts of the noble Eddard Stark betraying his wedding vows brought Tyrion’s attention to the result of that betrayal. The Bastard of Winterfell was a unique young man. Despite being the one to inform his brother, the acting Lord of Winterfell, of his trespassing in the crypts – he still quite liked the boy. Young Snow had not escaped the changes at Winterfell. In fact, he seemed to be more affected by them than the Lady of Winterfell.

‘Perhaps there is some connection between the two?’ He thought suddenly. ‘Perhaps Lady Stark attempted to have him removed now that her husband was gone from the castle? The attempt obviously failed, but what if the means had not been entirely gentle?’ His thoughts grew more serious as he delved into them. ‘Is that why she looked at him so strangely when we were all in that courtyard? Is that why young Snow was rarely out of the company of his wolf and the Red Woman?’

He was growing more frustrated as all the questions bounced around his mind. He did not even know why he was so determined to get to the bottom of the goings on at Winterfell; the affairs of the Starks currently in residence there had never fascinated him as did the tales of the castle’s ancient occupants.

One thing he knew without a doubt was that the meeting with Lady Stark was not planned. That other woman with red hair had put the idea in her head, and Tyrion knew she had an agenda beyond ensuring his conduct at Winterfell was made known to her husband. For all her caution and word play, she had not completely diverted Tyrion from the trail.

‘Whatever that agenda might be, I’ll make no more progress in figuring it out tonight,’ He decided at last. ‘I should make sure I am as fresh as possible for the scolding the wolf lord is sure to give me.’

The other thing he did not doubt was the news of young Snow’s mother being genuine. He had felt his own heart wither slightly upon hearing it. Perhaps that is why he was so fond of the boy; whose own birth was not unlike his own.

As he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to claim him, he could not help but fear the King’s potential reaction if he hears that Tyrion had been found snooping around the tomb of his beloved she-wolf. He has seen Robert rage at people simply for mentioning her enough to know that the King was not to be tested where Lyanna Stark was concerned.

‘Let’s just hope I can placate Lord Stark enough to not inform his friend of my location in the crypts,’ He said as he felt himself drifting off.

Tyrion finally encountered some good fortune.

He had arrived in the capital and once all the greetings had been made and pleasantries exchanged, he presented himself to Lord Stark.

The Hand of the King spoke before Tyrion could even open his mouth. He was too busy at that time to discuss the reasons he received a letter from his son, but they would meet on the morrow after Tyrion was finished breaking his fast.

He breathed a sigh of relief as soon as he was settled in his quarters knowing that he had an extra
He and his brother were sharing wine and words about Tyrion's meeting with Lord Stark.

"Why you would want to go snooping around the Stark tombs is beyond me," Jaime said after Tyrion had finished speaking of his visit to the crypts. "Though, I would imagine the Starks down there have much more personality than the one currently serving our noble King."

They both laughed at that, the stoic countenance of the northman had not changed at all despite being away from his grim fortress of a home.

Tyrion wished he could allow the laughter to continue all night long, but he needed to speak of his fears, and he knew his brother was the best ear he could hope for.

"Speaking of the King," He said slowly, waiting for Jaime to finish his chortling. "It might not be Lord Stark I should fear the most when news of my tomb exploration is made known. If it is."

"The King could care less about anything other than drinking wine, bedding boars and hunting whores. Oh," Jaime allowed himself a small laugh in response to Tyrion's own. "I may have got one confused with the other. In all seriousness though, why would the King care you were in the Stark crypts?"

Tyrion paused to fill his empty goblet. Jaime's was still full, but he did not have a meeting with the Hand on the morrow.

"It was Lord Stark himself who forbade me from entering the crypts," He said after gulping down more than half of the wine he had just poured. "Yet the night following his departure I was discovered in those forbidden crypts."

"I still do not see-"

"It is whose tomb I was discovered in front of that causes me to worry for the King's reaction, should he discover as much." He cut across Jaime, giving him a pointed look.

"Still, why would Robert-" He stopped and frowned as he put it together. "Oh. Her tomb?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"We've seen how he reacts when someone even mentions her," Jaime said after exhaling sharply. "He'll consider it disrespectful for anyone to be standing before his lady's resting place. Hells," Jamie sighed as he continued speaking. "He still complains to this day that she is buried in Winterfell in the first place. You are right to be worried, Tyrion."

That much he knew already; he had been hoping his brother would have given him some measure of comfort. Jaime knowing the same as Tyrion only gave him more reasons to be afraid.

"Not even Lord Stark knows of my going in there, at least," He said as he considered something. "If his wife is as honest as he is. The Stark heir sent a letter to his father, informing him that I would require an audience when I arrive. I managed to convince them to allow me to tell the Hand of my actions in his home, less chance of the King finding out, I thought."

"How did you convince them to do that? And how do you know Stark won't run and tell his friend the moment he finishes laying into you?"
"I have my ways. Though, I cannot take much credit for the result. The Starks value their honour so much, it seems they cannot deny a man the chance to be honest himself. I doubt it would have worked with any other House," He said with a small smirk. "As for Lord Stark telling the King of my indirect insult to his late sister's resting place, I admit I have been a little worried about that."

'That is an understatement if ever there was one,' He said to himself.

The closer he got to the capital, the greater his fear grew at possibly facing the wrath of Robert Baratheon.

He knew that his father would not take such actions against his precious family name lightly, but that would not stop the King from punishing Tyrion. The man being almost always drunk would do little to help him control his fierce temper.

He knew his best chance of ensuring the King never learns about his accidental visit to Lyanna Stark's tomb rested with her brother. He would have to rely on the man's honesty and honour to not tell the King, and to do that Tyrion would need to show himself honest and honourable - despite his actions indicating otherwise.

"It seems I have no choice but to hope that Lord Stark decides his own punishments would be enough for me," He said to his brother.

Jaime was silent after Tyrion had finished speaking. When he finally spoke, the words that came out of his mouth were the funniest thing Tyrion had heard all night.

"I shall speak with Cersei," He said. "Perhaps she can keep the King distracted or speak with him on your behalf. Tyrion-"

He broke off as Tyrion's laughter only grew with each word.

The idea of his sister doing anything to defend or aid Tyrion was outright comical. She would much rather watch him squirm before her husband and made to suffer whatever punishment the King chose for him.

"She might hate hearing of the Stark girl, that much is true," He said once he had managed to stop laughing. "That does not mean she would not welcome the chance of seeing her beloved dwarf of a brother punished." He could hear the bitter tone in his own voice, and surely his brother did as well.

"I will speak with her regardless," Jaime answered, not even attempting to deny the truth of Tyrion's words. "In the meantime, you should ensure you have a clear head."

He reached across the table and took the goblet from Tyrion's hand, and snatched up the rest of the wine before Tyrion could reach for that.

"I think better when I am drunk," He resisted the urge to pout and demand the wine back. "But if it eases your worries, I shall bow to your wisdom, dear brother."

"If only you had asked for it before you decided to go snooping around the Starks crypts," Jaime replied with a smile. "Why did you go there anyway?"

Tyrion did not know what to say to that. He could tell him that he was simply curious, but that would probably earn him a reprimand from Jaime. On the other hand, he could not say that he went into the crypts because he was frustrated with not knowing the secrets of the Starks. Well, not outright, at least.
"When we were there, the first time," He said slowly, still thinking through his answer. "Did you notice anything odd about the Starks?"

"Well, now that you mentioned it," Jaime looked seriously at Tyrion, who allowed himself to feel hopeful that Jaime had some answers for him. "I did see Lord Stark smile at that feral daughter of his," He laughed as the serious expression left his face. "A smiling Stark? It was an odd sight indeed."

Tyrion allowed himself a small laugh, not because he found his brother's words amusing, but because they gave him more time to think of a suitable answer.

"When I returned there after visiting the Wall, which I do not recommend, the atmosphere was much different," He said with more confidence. "They were not happy to see me, though who would be?" He laughed to cover his bitter tone. "Something had changed there, and I wanted to know what. Why did Lord Stark wait so long to depart? Why did he refuse to wed his daughter to Joffrey? I believed I would find the answer, but all I found was silent Starks and polite reminders to mind my own business. So, if I could not know that particular secret, then I would discover a few more in the tombs of the Kings of Winter. You know how I have always enjoyed those tales," He smiled warmly as his brother nodded. Jaime had joined him in reading a fair few, once father had forced him to overcome his aversion to reading and writing. "Unfortunately, I was caught before I could get far enough to see one of their tombs. I had not been expecting anyone else to be down there, given how late the hour was."

"And who was skulking around down there at so late an hour? Besides you, of course," Jaime grinned. "During our stay there, I only ever saw the King's wolf pup go in there."

"Young Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell."

"I remember him. He looks more of a Stark than the rest of the litter," He chuckled at his own words. "He is not unskilled with a blade, either. Barristan certainly found him interesting for that alone. Still, I am surprised the Trout would allow him to remain in Winterfell with her husband in the south."

"Yes, I found that quite strange," Tyrion said. "I assumed I would meet the boy on the road back from the Wall, but I encountered only his uncle. He was not particularly pleasant, either."

Jaime was silent for a few moments as he sipped more of his wine. Tyrion admired his restraint when it came to indulgence.

"Has anything interesting happened here while I was away?" He asked his brother. "I know the answer already, but I'm not one to forgo social niceties."

"Oh, it was tedious without you here, that much is true," Jaime replied with obvious sarcasm. "In all honesty, I would have preferred that. Our dear sister has been sour company since the Tyrells arrived. Well, even more so than usual." He amended in response to Tyrion's raised eyebrow, He knew that something was fouling Cersei's mood, but until then he did not know what.

"Ah, and why is that?" He asked. "I only ask so that I know what to thank them for." He finished with a grin.

"She's convinced they intend to wed Tyrell's daughter to Joffrey," Jaime answered ignoring his jape. "Though, the man has not even mentioned a betrothal to the King. Not even the most beautiful lady in the Seven Kingdoms is good enough for her golden prince."
'That little shit is not even worthy of the foulest whore in the Seven Kingdoms,' Tyrion said to himself. 'Why the Tyrells would want their daughter anywhere near the beast is beyond me. A crown is not worth what that girl would have to endure.'

"Perhaps she is still bitter about missing out on her own prince," He looked at Jaime meaningfully. "You know who."

"Yes, I do." Jaime replied flatly, surprising Tyrion. "It is late, and you should ensure you're not too far gone in the morning to speak with the Hand," He said in the same tone as he stood and looked pointedly at the wine on the far side of the table. "Not even father could save you if you further offend the Starks."

Tyrion was shocked at his brother's reaction, though it did not take him long to figure out why.

"Jaime," He started, a feeling of guilt welling up inside him. "I did not mean to-"

"It's nothing," He replied as he made for the door. "Get some rest and no more wine. Not. One. Drop."

And with a half-smile he was gone, leaving Tyrion alone to dread the coming meeting with the wolf lord.

'Jaime is right, it would not do for me to be half-drunk meeting with Lord Stark,' He thought as he looked at the flagon before him. 'It would not do for me to bring even more trouble upon my head.'

As he climbed into his bed a few minutes later, he was already regretting his decision to forgo draining the rest of the wine. Turning over in his bed, preparing for sleep that he knew would not come lightly, he allowed his mind to race through possible ways of getting himself out of this mess with as minimal shame as possible.

'I am a Lannister.'

Tyrion had been repeating this over and over in head ever since his eyes opened that morning, but no matter how many times he said it to himself, it did nothing to dispel the unease he felt.

He was once more going over his planned words as he made his way to the Tower of the Hand. Despite his nervousness, he was confident his hastily put together argument would lessen the ire of the northman.

He felt that confidence ebb ever so slightly when the Stark guard knocked on the door to his lord's solar.

It fell away even more as he heard Lord Stark call for him to enter.

It completely abandoned him when he laid eyes on the Hand of the King, sitting at his desk with that same stoic expression on his face.

It was as he looked into those sharp grey eyes that he knew, with complete certainty, that this was not going to go well for him - not at all.

'I am a Lannister. I am a Lannister.' He repeated to himself once more. 'I will not cower. At least, I will not be so obvious about it.'

"Lord Hand," He said hoping his voice would hold firm. "I trust you have settled well here in the
capital, and in your new position?"

It could not hurt to delay the inevitable just a little longer.

"Lord Tyrion. I have grown accustom to the position, aye, but the warmth is something I doubt I'll ever fully adjust to," Lord Stark replied without emotion. "Please, sit."

Tyrion climbed into the chair he had indicated. Before he could think of something else to say to Lord Stark, the man decided to cut straight to the point.

"So, my lord," He said in that same reserved voice. "I received a message from my son, Robb, informing me that you would be requesting an audience to speak of your second visit to Winterfell. Is there some grievance that occurred during said visit?"

'So, the young lord and his mother have not told him of my actions there,' He was surprised, to say the least.

"None committed by your family, Lord Hand. I must admit that I conducted myself poorly during my time as a guest in your home," He lowered his head as he spoke and took as deep a breath as he could. He did not want to appear too nervous. "Let me begin by offering my sincerest apologies, Lord Stark. It was not my intent to disrespect your home and your family."

It was hard not to squirm under the unrelenting gaze Lord Stark had fixed upon him.

"How, pray tell, have you disrespected my home and my family, Lord Tyrion?" The Hand asked in a slightly less emotionless tone.

"I-I, well," He was at a loss this early in the meeting, that did not bode well. "Lord Hand, the worst of my unintentional slights against your House was my visit to the crypts, even after-"

"After I had denied you access to them." He finished for Tyrion. The anger was there in his voice now.

"Yes, Lord Hand."

"By what right did you presume to do such a thing?" Lord Stark asked.

This was where Tyrion knew he had to choose his words carefully. He did not know anything about Eddard Stark's temper, if indeed he had one, but his son had all but admitted that the only reason Tyrion was not harmed in Winterfell was because of the protection of Guest Right. He had no such shield here.

"I had no right, I-I know that. I deeply regret my actions, Lord Hand, I have nothing to say that will-"

"How would your father respond, if my son were to do the same in your home, Lord Tyrion?"

'Like father, like son,' Tyrion thought. 'If only the same were true for my father and myself. I would not be in this situation.'

"He would not tolerate it lightly, Lord Hand. His reputation is, as you know," He knew it was risky attempting to say his next words, but they might prevent the Stark from reacting too rashly. "Formidable when the Lannister name is disrespected even in the slightest."

Tyrion glanced fearfully at the Hand of the King to gauge his reaction to his words, but the
"What did you hope to find down there, my lord?" He asked, breaking the silence at last. "I trust you did not further disrespect my ancestors by disturbing their tombs?"

"No, of course not, Lord Stark!" He answered quickly, the subject being so close to the reason he was afraid. "I wished to look upon one of the tombs of the Kings of Winter. That is all, Lord Stark. I said as much to your son, Robb, when he asked the same of me," He paused as a sudden thought entered his mind. "He is doing quite well in his position as Lord of Winterfell, you will be pleased to hear. Truly he was well prepared for-

"Your flattery will get you nowhere with me, Lannister." Stark said sharply, cutting him off. "I would expect nothing less from my son. Did you accomplish the task in my family's resting place? How is it that Robb knew at all, might I ask?"

This was the moment he had been dreading. He should not have attempted to flatter the Hand of the King - especially when the next words out of his mouth would be concerning his late sister.

"Your bas-" He stopped himself, not wanting to risk further offending the man. "Your son, Jon, he discovered me just as I happened upon the tomb of your," He had to clear his throat. "The tomb of your late sister, Lady Lyanna."

Emotion crossed Lord Stark's face for the first time. Tyrion was not sure if it was anger or fear or some combination of the two. It was enough to set his mind racing, despite the fear he so clearly felt as the northman allowed another silence to fall.

'Anger I can understand but why would there be fear?' Tyrion's mind was racing with possibilities.

"And what did you and Jon speak of before the tomb of my sister, if anything, my lord?" The Hand finally asked, his voice controlled.

"Well, first he prevented his beast from savaging me, at least," He paused, wary of making any accusations. "I assumed that is what would have happened had he not appeared. I confess, I believed the dead were rising when I first saw him," He let out a small laugh despite the situation, slightly embarrassed for admitting as much. "He came out from behind the tomb of your late sister, I do not know what he was doing there. I greeted him but he told me I should not be down there-"

"Aye, and he was right about that," Lord Stark interrupted. "Continue."

He did not have to force himself to resist the urge to bite back at the command, for he felt no urge to do so. He was frightened of this man, there was no denying it.

"I enquired about his health. He did look quite unwell. I am not sure if you have had word from Winterfell about his condition?" He asked the man across from him but continued after a few moments when he gave no response. "As he was escorting me out of the crypts, I asked him of his decision to join the Night's Watch but he said he had no intentions of doing so," Tyrion paused, remembering the boy who had been eager to do so only weeks before that moment. "It was quite a difference from when we first spoke of the Watch, in fact, the only time he seemed interested in our conversation was when I mentioned the Targaryen at the Wall."

Lord Stark's face betrayed no emotion, but his slight intake of breath was reaction enough for Tyrion's mind to once more begin connecting dots aimlessly.

"And what happened after that, my lord?" There was an edge to his voice now.
"Well, we reached the surface and parted ways."

"And you spoke of nothing else before doing so?" Lord Stark pressed him.

"Nothing of consequence, my lord," Tyrion answered truthfully. "Nothing beyond the usual small talk, but even that was one-sided. He was not very talkative, Lord Stark."

A slight frown appeared on the Hand's face as he stared long and hard at Tyrion. Before he could break the uncomfortable silence, Lord Stark rose from his seat and made for the door.

"Ensure we are not disturbed. No one is to enter this section of the Tower," He instructed the guards at his door. "Once you have done this, stand guard at each end of the hall, away from my study."

"Yes, my lord." He heard one of the northerners say.

The door closed and locked with a chilling finality and Tyrion could not stop his fear from running wildly through his mind.

That fear did not lessen as the Hand of the King resumed his seat and fixed his grey eyes upon him once more.

"Lord Tyrion, you have disrespected my home and ancestors," His voice was calm, but Tyrion still had to fight the urge to plead for mercy. "You say your trespassing in the crypts is the worst of your slights. I can only assume that it was not the sole act of disrespect you paid to my House. I would know all of them, my lord." His gaze intensified as he spoke his next words. "And do not think of leaving anything out, no matter how inconsequential it may seem."

He knew there was nothing to be done. No clever words would get him out of this, nor would his father's name and reputation. He had no choice but to be honest.

"Of course, Lord Hand. If I may," He paused unsure if he should ask. "Might I trouble you for some wine, before I begin?"

His answer was clear enough in the glare he received from the wolf lord.

'Well, this is going to be shit.' He said as he swallowed to wet his throat. 'The King might not have given me the chance to explain, but at least he would have had wine.'

Chapter End Notes

And we have another player in the mix now!

I'm looking forward to writing the next few King's Landing chapters. I do enjoy writing wordplay and scheming lol

Feedback is always appreciated :)
Eddard Stark was a patient man.

He had to be since it was his duty to govern the proud and argumentative northerners. Years of being the voice of reason between two disputing parties has only improved his ability to maintain his composure and show restraint.

It was taking every trace of it to prevent himself from sending his fist into the Lannister’s face.

He told him that the crypts were no place for him. That they were no gallery of curiosities for him to parade through. Yet, the moment he had departed his home to come and serve in this stifling city, Tyrion Lannister took it upon himself to do what Ned had ordered him not to.

He remained calm throughout the man’s confession of visiting the crypts, but when he mentioned Jon and that he had found him at Lya’s tomb, he could feel that calm slipping.

That they had shared words at all would have been enough for him to worry over, but that he had caught Jon in the crypts before his mother’s tomb almost stopped his heart.

‘I must know all that they discussed,’ He thought as he fixed his gaze on the uncomfortable Lannister. ‘Though I must be careful I do not reveal anything myself. By word or otherwise.’

“I confess,” Lord Tyrion said after clearing his throat for the third time. “I do not know where best to begin.”

“I would ask that you tell me more of your concerns for Jon’s health,” He said as the idea occurred to him. “You say he looked quite unwell, how so?”

“Ah, yes, of course,” The Lannister stammered, relief obvious. “Well, when I first laid eyes on him in, well, there, I could not help but notice how exhausted he looked. I did not see him at any of the meals during my second stay, not even the one your lady wife invited him and his companion to.”

‘That does not tell me much about his health,’ Ned said to himself, going over Tyrion’s words. ‘Who is this companion he spoke of?’

“Had he gone to see the Maester at all, to your knowledge, Lord Tyrion?”

“I do not believe so, no. I am no Maester, my lord,” He said with a huff of amusement. “But I do not think the boy was sickening with something of the body. He seemed to have energy enough to join his wolf on a hunt,” He looked thoughtful as he continued to speak. “He did seem a little better the last I saw him, but it was still quite a difference from the boy I met during my first stay at Winterfell.”

‘That’s because he is different, Lannister,’ Ned thought with a surge of pride. ‘He was still under the yoke of my cowardice when you met him.’

He took note of all Lord Tyrion had said, intending to evaluate it all when he was alone. Now, he must know all that this Lannister presumed to do in his home.

“I will write home and enquire about Jon’s health. I shall instruct my son to ensure he is seen by Maester Luwin,” He said to indicate that part of the conversation was over. “Now, my lord, tell me of the other ‘slights’ as you call them, that you paid my House.”
The Lannister pursed his lips and cleared his throat once again. Ned thought he would have to prompt him further but then the lord started to speak.

"Your lady wife graciously invited me to sup at your hall’s high table with your son and herself,” He began sheepishly. “It was there that my wine addled mind and loose tongue unintentionally insulted your lady wife.”

Anger flashed across his face before he could stop it. The Lannister noticed, his startled expression making it all too clear.

“And just how did you insult my lady wife?”

“I-I, well, we were on the subject of young Snow. I did not see him at the evening meal, and as the conversation progressed I,” He once more cleared his throat, the sound was beginning to annoy Ned. “I asked her whether she knew anything of young Snow’s mother- “

Blind anger and fear had caused him to shoot to his feet, he slammed his fist down on the desk so hard an inkpot upended. He took no notice of this as he leaned across to tower of the shivering Lannister.

“By what right do you dare ask such a thing of my wife, Lannister?” He growled at the man before him. “What business is it of yours? Speak!”

He knew he was allowing his emotions to do his thinking for him, but fear was rendering him blind to reason. He could not think of a plausible reason for a Lannister to ask about Jon’s mother. That worried him even more.

“I am waiting, my lord.” He spat as the Lannister still had not answered him.

“I had no right, none at all, Lord Stark,” He stammered. “I know it now as I knew it then. I have no excuse for my behaviour, and I apologised to your lady wife at the first opportunity. I have- “

“And just why were you asking of Jon’s mother?” He asked despite knowing it could be a risk. “I assure you, my lord, she is no concern of yours.”

“I am aware, my lord, your lady wife told me the unfortunate news. I believe that might be why young Snow looked so unwell, it must have been quite a shock.”

“What must have been quite a shock?” He asked quickly, fear well and truly consuming his anger.

“Why, to find out that his mother had died birthing him, my lord,” The Lannister answered with a confused look on his face. “Your lady wife informed me of this when your son sent me to her to speak of my transgressions. That is why you have not received a raven about my conduct in your home, so that I might tell you myself.”

Ned allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief, it was easy to disguise as one of weariness.

For a moment he had thought that Catelyn had told the Lannister the truth about Jon. He knew now how foolish that thought had been, but he felt the truth was less of a secret now others knew of it.

All the relief he felt at telling Jon and his wife had quickly been replaced with the fear of having more potential sources of the truth getting out.

“Yes, I-“ He cleared his throat, the grief always so close to the surface when he thought of his sister. “I felt I had to tell him before I departed. I should have done it sooner, I admit, but I was
afraid to cause him pain.”

“That is understandable, Lord Stark,” Tyrion said not unkindly. “My own lady mother perished on the birthing bed. I consider it a strange comfort after learning of young Snow’s situation. If I had grown up with the hope of one day meeting my mother, only to be told it was never to be, well-“

“We are not here to discuss Jon’s mother, Lord Tyrion. Asking my lady wife about her was beyond disrespectful, do you not understand the insult you paid her?” He shut the Lannister down, his guilt springing to the surface. “We are here to discuss your disrespectful acts in my home. You trespass in the resting place of my family. You insult my lady wife at the table she invited you to sup at. You ask questions you have no right to know the answers to. What else is there, my lord?”

He hoped that was the end of it. The Lannister’s words about Jon and hope were threatening to destroy his composure.

With great effort, he pushed it to the back of his mind with all the other thoughts he would deal with later.

“I asked the same questions of your staff, Lord Stark,” Tyrion answered, that fearful expression back on his face. “I did not ask of young Snow’s late mother, I asked if they had noticed anything of note recently. I admit,” He chuckled as he spoke. “I thought I was being subtle about it, my lord. Your staff are quite loyal, such things are rare where coin is concerned.”

“Other than the royal visit, which you yourself were a part of, what else of note could there be at Winterfell that would concern you, Lord Tyrion?” He asked, ignoring the attempt at flattery.

“Well, I pride myself on-“ Tyrion started.

“As all Lannisters are wont to do,” He interrupted. “Please, get to the point. I must meet with the King after our appointment.”

He knew that was rude of him but given that the Lannister had insulted his family, both living and dead, he felt he deserved at least that.

“Of course, forgive me, Lord Hand,” Lannister replied, ignoring the remark. “I could not help but notice the difference between my first visit and my second. Beyond your absence, my lord. The most curious of these differences was how your lady wife seemed to have a different opinion of young Snow,” He stopped to look at Ned, ensuring it was safe to continue. “And I wished to know why your departure to the capital was so delayed. I know none of these were mine to know, and I do regret my actions deeply.”

‘You regret that you were caught, most like,’ Ned thought. ‘If Jon had not found you in the crypts, I doubt a Lannister would have the honour to confess to something he believed he could get away with.’

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. He was tired of all the word games and politicking. He knew it was necessary, and that his Gods were guiding him, but that did not make it any less tiring for him.

Gods or no, he was still just a man.

“Lord Tyrion,” He said, satisfied that he knew all he needed to. “Were you my son, I would have set you to serve as a common servant of the House you insulted. After I had ensured you were disciplined enough by mine own hand, however,” He fixed the Lannister with a wolf stare, having found it to be a useful tool here in the capital. “I am not your lord father. He is due at court in the
next moon or so, I shall discuss your misconduct at my home with him. Your actions bring shame upon your family name, my lord. Sneaking around my family crypts like a common graverobber – I imagine Lord Tywin can think of nothing less befitting his son and heir.”

The Lannister was visibly shaking at his words. It was no secret that all three of Tywin Lannister’s children were terrified of him.

“I trust your enquiries into my family’s personal matters were left in the North, Lord Tyrion?”

Tyrion cleared his throat yet again before answering. “Indeed, Lord Hand.” He said slowly. “I know I cannot ask anything of you, but I wonder what your intentions are in regard to the King knowing of my trespasses?”

“King Robert is not a Stark,” He said, confused as to what Robert had anything to do with it. “This is not a matter for the King to decide upon, it is my dead that you have-” He paused as he put the pieces together. "I understand."

He realised why the Lannister was afraid of Robert’s reaction. He had been found beside Lya’s tomb. Robert might hate her being buried in Winterfell, but he would consider it an insult to her memory that anyone but a Stark or himself were skulking around her tomb.

He could not blame Lord Tyrion for his fears.

“I will not be informing the King of your location in my home, my lord,” He said, raising his voice slightly as the man visibly relaxed. “Do not mistake my reason for doing so, Lord Tyrion. Should you ever pay such an insult to House Stark again, I will not be so lenient. Remember that, should you ever request the hospitality of Winterfell again.”

“He Lannister laughed. “King Robert’s temper is something I have witnessed many times, to be on the- “

“Of course, Lord Hand. Thank you. Truly,” The Lannister laughed. “King Robert’s temper is something I have witnessed many times, to be on the- “

“If that is all, my lord,” Ned cut him off as he rose to his feet. “There are matters I must attend to before I meet with the King. I invite you to dine with me on the morrow, to show that all is forgiven. Forgiven,” He stated once more as he looked the man in the eye. “Not forgotten.”

“Lord Stark, I would be honoured to,” Tyrion looked genuinely surprised. “I did not expect such a request, it is much more than I feel I deserve. Thank you, Lord Hand. Truly.”

With that he bowed and took his leave.

Ned fell back in his chair, exhausted and frustrated. He missed his family dearly.

He was satisfied that the Lannister knew nothing of the truth of Jon, but he knew better than to believe Tyrion would ever let the thread go completely.

“How much more of this must I wade through before I reach home?’ He asked himself wearily. ‘This is no place for a Stark.’

After another exhausting evening of watching the King drink himself into unconsciousness, Ned was finally in his solar.

He could not rest, well, his mind could not rest. Not just yet. He still had to go through all the events that occurred during his meeting with Lord Tyrion.
Despite his decision to forgive the Lannister for his trespasses, he was still more than a little enraged at the audacity of them. He was no friend to Tywin Lannister, but he would not even consider intruding in the resting place of his dead – especially as a guest in his home.

He had no real intention of speaking with the Lannister patriarch, no matter how angry he was with his son’s actions. He could not risk the calculating Tywin Lannister having even the thinnest thread to pull on. He was a brilliant military commander and Ned would take no chances with such a man knowing of his nephew.

The nephew he had left in Winterfell less than a month after telling him his entire life had been a lie.

Ned was worried to hear of Jon’s health, having received no mention of it in any of the messages he received from home. He should have expected Jon would neglect himself in terms of food and rest in the wake of such a revelation.

‘I should have taken him to Lya’s tomb myself, before I left,’ he said to himself with regret. ‘He has seen it countless times before, but the first time he saw it as his mother’s resting place I should have been there.’

He hoped that Jon was faring better than he had been when the Lannister was in Winterfell. He intended to ask of him when next he wrote home, though he knew he must be clever with his words in case the raven was intercepted.

‘This city is full of schemers and information gatherers,’ Ned thought. ‘I suppose I should count myself among the schemers, since I came here with a purpose beyond that of serving as Hand.’

Despite knowing that his Gods wanted him to be in this place and having seen the devastation that his family would have been met with had he acted with complete honour, he still felt disgust for conducting himself in such a way.

He had never been one for words but since arriving in King’s Landing he had spoken more than his fair share of them. Most of them only half-truths and none of them without purpose.

His disgust was joined by shame as he remembered more of Lord Tyrion’s words.

He had allowed Jon to grow up knowing nothing of his mother. Ned believed that was the best way of ensuring his safety, but also to prevent himself disrespecting his late sister by naming some other woman as Jon’s mother. He should not have allowed himself to have been so short-sighted regarding how it would devastate Jon when he learned the truth.

‘But I had no real intention of telling him the truth,’ Ned reminded himself with shame. ‘I was going to allow to him to take the black and spend his life at the Wall with Benjen.’

He would not have told Jon the truth if the Gods had not intervened. The more he thought about it, the less he could deny it. If the Gods had remained silent that day before the Heart Tree, then he would have allowed Jon to depart for the Wall when he himself departed for King’s Landing.

‘And in doing so, I would have doomed the rest of my children to horrible fates.’

He would not waste the second chance his Gods had seen fit to grant him. His resolve to do so, however, provided little comfort for the turmoil he felt within himself in response to the way he was playing the game.

A knock at his door interrupted his thoughts.
“Lord Stark,” He heard Jory’s voice as he opened the door a crack. “Lady Olenna Tyrell is here to see you.”

He had not been expecting that, but he should not have been surprised.

He had been waiting for the Queen of Thorns to request a private audience with him ever since he accompanied her granddaughter on her little show in the city.

“See her in, Jory,” He called to his loyal guard as he rose from his seat by the fire.

Lady Olenna Tyrell might appear to be frail and stooped by age, but any who spent more than a few minutes in her presence knew that this was not the case.

“Lord Hand, forgive my unannounced visit,” She said as she took the seat Ned offered across from his own. “I thought it past time you and I have words. In private.” She finished with a pointed look at his door.

“Of course, my lady,” He said as he once again stood and went to the door. “Jory,” He whispered to his guard. “Same situation as before with Lord Tyrion; ensure we are not disturbed and stand away from the door.”

“Yes, my lord,” Jory answered without question, despite the confusion on his face.

He closed the door and locked it and then made his way back to the fireplace to resume his seat. He was thinking of how best to begin the conversation, when the Queen of Thorns beat him to it.

“What is the true reason you refused to wed your daughter to the crown prince?” She asked without preamble. “And please, don’t feed me that tosh about it disrespecting your sister’s memory.”

“Lady Olenna,” He said, feeling suddenly angry at her flippant way of speaking of his sister. “I find your direct words refreshing but mind them when speaking of my late sister.”

She did not look remotely abashed or afraid, instead she merely nodded and gave a small smile. “I meant no disrespect, of course not, but,” She continued in that same curt voice. “If you think I believed even for a second that that was the reason you turned down a royal betrothal, you must take me for a fool.”

“Only a fool would do so,” He replied, no doubt in his words. “I am not a fool, not the kind you were expecting me to be,” He looked the woman in the eye as he spoke. “I assume that was your expectation, Lady Olenna?”

She did not answer immediately but Ned could tell he had hit the mark.

“The northerners have always had a reputation for being dim-witted,” She said again without any attempt to soften her words. “I admit, I did not expect you to be as capable as you have proved yourself to be. It is not very often I am surprised or at a loss, Lord Stark. Enough of that,” She leaned forward as she continued. “Are you going to tell me the real reason you denied your brother in all but blood?”

Despite his wordplay, Ned knew he was in a difficult position.

The Tyrells did not see him as an obstacle to whatever plans they might have, but nor was he an
ally in their eyes. If he told Lady Olenna his true reasons for turning down Robert’s proposal, then he would have just handed her a weapon to be used against him.

On the other hand, she was too clever to believe any lie he would tell, no matter how close to the truth. She was not a northerner, who would accept his word almost unquestionably due to the reputation of his House.

Whatever answer he gave would change the way House Tyrell viewed him. Give them the truth, and he would be their pawn. Give them a lie, and he would be their opponent.

He knew all too well what they wanted, but they knew nothing of his true purpose here.

“Why do you think the reason I gave is false, Lady Olenna?” He asked to stall for time.

Olenna’s smirk made it clear she saw straight through his attempt, but she indulged him, nonetheless.

“I do not think it is entirely false, Lord Stark. I do believe the idea of your daughter marrying a Baratheon caused certain unpleasant memories to stir. I do not, however, believe that misery would be enough to prevent you from seizing the opportunity the King laid at your feet.”

‘So, she is not without some form of empathy,’ Ned thought as he mulled over her words. ‘I might be able to use that to my advantage, should the situation require it.’

“The only thing I want for my House is for its future to be secure. It already is - in the North.” He said proudly. “Beyond that, I want my children to be safe and happy. My daughter would not have thrived in the capital; she is of the North.”

“Yes, yes, every parent wants for their child to be safe and well. You are avoiding the question, Lord Stark.” She stated simply. “My patience is wearing thin.”

“You know why I refused the match, Lady Olenna,” Ned said slowly, fixing his gaze upon the woman across from him. “You are no fool, we have already established that. You know why I would not subject my daughter to such a fate. The question,” He leaned forward himself to add weight to his words. “Is why would you allow your granddaughter to suffer it? I do not believe, not for a moment, that our trip into the city was anything more than a clever move to ensure I view House Tyrell in a favourable light. Your granddaughter is as intelligent as she is kind and generous. I do not doubt her sincerity in wanting to help others, so,” He leaned back as he finished speaking. “Why do you still intend to wed her to the crown prince?”

If he had not been so focused on maintaining his composure, he would have allowed himself to feel a little proud. Few people could boast of leaving the Queen of Thorns at a loss for words.

He knew it would not remain so for long, thus, he was not surprised when she began speaking once again.

“You really are more capable than I assumed, Lord Stark,” She said with admiration. “Yes, I wish for you to see my House in a favourable light as you say. Yes, I do know the true reasons you rejected the betrothal between your daughter and the crown prince,” She paused to give him a measuring look. “You were wise not to admit them to me, though I suppose you already knew that. I would rather count you as an ally, Lord Stark. I do not trust any of the allies I already have, so yes, we would have used your confession as leverage should it have proven necessary,” Her gaze turned to steel as she continued. “I will always do what is necessary for House Tyrell. Just as I will do whatever is necessary, no matter how brutal or underhanded, to protect my own.”
She was letting her guard down more than she had intended to.

‘For all her steel and barbs, she is still a mother and grandmother at heart,’ Ned realised. ‘And she has revealed more of herself than I have because of it.’

“I have seen enough of the boy to know that he would make a poor husband for my granddaughter,” Olenna continued with more control in her voice. “We have prepared her for dealing with such things, as all noblewomen should be,” She looked pointedly at Ned. “Am I correct in assuming you have no intention of changing your mind about your daughter and the crown prince?”

“You are, my lady. Only,” He could not help but feel confused. “If you know the boy would be a poor husband, why would you subject your granddaughter to him? Preparation or no, she will find little joy with him.”

“Let me worry about my own, Lord Stark.” Lady Olenna said as she rose from her seat. “I pray we can have another frank discussion soon; you are not the only one who finds such conversations refreshing.”

“I am certain we will, Lady Olenna,” Ned replied as he stood to walk her to his door. “Will you be offering your granddaughter’s hand to the crown prince in the near future?”

“That is a choice my son, the Lord of Highgarden, must make alone,” She said with that same knowing smile. “I daresay something will be announced before long. Lord Hand.”

“My lady,” Ned returned as he bowed her out of his solar.

He walked back over to his seat by the fireplace and allowed himself to sink into it.

‘How many others am I going to have to contend with?’ He thought to himself wearily. ‘I was careful to leave a trail with the Lady Margaery when we spoke, I cannot risk the same with her grandmother, lest she figure it out before the time is right. I do not even know if Jon will attempt to claim the throne, but surely it is the will of the Gods? A united realm would fare better against the horrors to come. Robert is not the King best suited for that.’ Ned admitted to himself at last.

“Enter,” He said with a sigh as another knock at his door interrupted his thoughts.

“Apologies, my lord,” Jory said as he walked over to him. “The Lady Olenna asked me to give you this. She said she forgot to give it to you herself.”

Curious, he took the crumpled parchment Jory was holding out to him and unfurled it.

There were no words on either side of it, just a crude drawing of what was clearly his own sigil.

“Why would she give me such a thing?” He asked Jory. “Did she give a reason?”

“None, Lord Stark,” Jory replied. “All she said was a mutual acquaintance drew it for you. She did not name said acquaintance, however.”

Ned nodded to Jory to indicate he wished to be alone.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Ned wondered as he stared at the hastily drawn wolf. ‘What mutual acquaintance have I with her? Why does Lady Olenna feel it important to give this to me?’

He dismissed the thought for now. It would not do to waste his energy thinking when he had no
real path to direct said thinking.

He longed for Winterfell more than ever as he stared into the flames. He missed his family more and more each day.

‘I must be sure to foster a friendship with House Tyrell,’ Ned said to himself as his thoughts inevitably returned to his impromptu meeting. ‘Should Jon wish to pursue the throne, they would be one of the best allies we could secure. They proved their loyalty to House Targaryen during the rebellion.’

Despite his best efforts not to, he attempted to decipher the meaning behind the piece of parchment Lady Olenna left for him. No matter how he tried to put the pieces together, he was at a loss. His Gods were silent in his mind as well, so he comforted himself with the belief that it must not be too important, if they did not feel the need to intervene.

‘I will return to Winterfell a madman if things continue as they are,’ He thought as he prepared himself for sleep. ‘Still, it will be a small price to pay to avoid what the Gods revealed to me.’

That comforting thought allowed sleep to claim him much faster than he expected. Though it did little to protect him from the torturous dreams he had had every night since his arrival here.
Jon never thought he would have children.

Believing himself to be a bastard his whole life, he knew he had nothing to bring to a marriage contract and he would sooner lose his manhood than father a bastard of his own.

He enjoyed playing with his siblings when they were younger and unruly, more than they were now, but the sentiment was not shared by their maids and servants. They all wore the same exasperated, hopeless expressions as they chased their charges around the castle.

Jon imagined he wore that same expression now. Only instead of a protesting Arya refusing to wear her new dress, he had a dragon who was refusing to be silent.

“Hush now,” He said in what he hoped was a soothing voice. “We cannot risk anyone hearing us, eh?”

He might appear calm on the exterior, but it was taking all he had to not stop and gape at his current situation.

Here he was, under the cover of the trees, with a creature many believed would never exist again.

In all his dreams of dragons, which were few to begin with, he knew that even the wildest of them would not have been able to imagine the creature in front of him.

The dragon was larger than he would have expected it to be, since it only hatched just over a week ago. It had four legs and when it stood at its highest, its back reached just past Jon’s knees. Its nose reached just under his hips if it raised its neck upwards. The wings were probably two feet or so each when spread, though thankfully the dragon seemed unable to fly just yet – not for want of trying.

The scales of the dragon were where things got even more interesting. They resembled the same rocky pattern they had as an egg and were pitch black. It looked as if the dragon had been carved out of dragonglass. Despite being so young, most of those scales were as hard as any rock he had felt, providing a natural form of armour. When these scales caught what little sun managed to pierce the trees, they reflected that light and gave the dragon an almost otherworldly glow.

Even without the sunlight, however, the dragon still had its own light. Those same purple and white patterns that had adorned the egg like gemstones, covered the dragon’s body in swirls and patterns that culminated in a diamond shaped crest at the centre of its head. As if it had three eyes instead of two. The patterns sometimes pulsated with that same purple and white glow. The eyes were also purple but occasionally shots of white would fill them as well, making a stark contrast to the black vertical slits.

It had a series of budding horns around its head, both above and to the side of its eyes and under its jaw. It was too early to tell how they would look when fully developed. The teeth were also small, but they looked no less sharp – and Jon was certain they would grow as well before long.

All in all, it was a very strange creature. Unlike his other animal companion, who had yet to make a noise beyond breathing, this one was loud enough to be heard by the entire North.
They were less than two hours away from the Wall, if Jon was correct, and so they needed the dragon to be silent lest they be discovered.

“Nyx, you need to quiet now,” He said to the dragon, trying to emulate the voice his uncle had used many times with him and his siblings.

Nyx felt like the only name that would suit such a creature. Her scales reminded him of the sky during the hour of the wolf, but the purple eyes and patterns made him think of the sky as morning approached. The white patterns resembled stars, especially when they pulsated at night when the dragon all but blended into the darkness.

It was Melisandre who had told Jon of the name. She told him of a goddess in a religion of an ancient civilisation, named Nyx, who was the night itself. Her skin was as black as the night sky and constellations and nebulae covered her body like decorations on a noblewoman's dress. When he first caught a glimpse of the dragon in the light of the day, he thought the name apt for her.

He did not know how but he was certain the dragon was female.

‘Just my luck to end up with the Arya of dragons,’ He sighed to himself as the dragon merely looked at him in response to his words.

“I will need to leave you for a few hours, and I have to know you will be silent.” He whispered to her, hoping she might understand a little more. “We cannot risk you being discovered.”

She just chirped in response and started to run around his legs, reminding him of some of the pups the kennel master would let them play with as children.

This was no pup, though, this was perhaps the most dangerous beast in the entire world. At least, she would be when fully grown.

His companions had suggested abandoning their plans to visit the Night’s Watch, but Jon knew he had to now more than ever. His Targaryen kin might well be the only one in Westeros who has even the faintest idea of how to control dragons.

Melisandre had told him that it would be unlikely, as this dragon was not like those his ancestors had used to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. He did not really understand her meaning but he insisted that he meet with his uncle regardless.

As with Ghost he was aware of a strange bond forming with Nyx, but this felt different.

Ghost felt like a part of him. An extension of himself, but it had not always been this way. He could sometimes speak with Ghost without needing any words – yet another thing he did not understand.

Nyx, however, did not feel like an extension of himself but she did have a presence in his mind already. Whereas Ghost was accommodating and silent, Nyx was dominating and loud. He did not understand any of it, which is why he needed to speak with his Targaryen uncle.

Melisandre said that her Lord of Light would not have allowed Jon to hatch the dragon if he could not control her, but she offered no suggestions beyond such words.

Maro and Garret had nothing to contribute either. Garret was silent most of the time, either from awe or fear, Jon did not know. Maro was also silent, but Jon could not discern why he was acting so uncharacteristically; he was usually the loudest of their little band. Melisandre told him that Garret had brought the egg to him when it was burning with the white flames, but he did not know
why that would cause him to withdraw. They clearly did him no harm, nor did they wound Jon either.

Melisandre had not been so lucky. She attempted to bring the egg to Jon first, but the white flames proved too hot for her to touch. This was not normal for her, she said, as her God protected her from flames to a degree.

Yet more answers Jon did not have. He had no illusions that his uncle would know of this mysterious fire that he somehow brought into the world, but he might know of some tome he could consult from his time at the Citadel. Even that was a small hope.

“Stop that,” He sighed as the dragon had moved away from him and started to scale the nearest tree.

He was thankful the dragon could not fly, but that did not stop her from climbing the trees when bored. She moved with the same awkwardness Ghost did as a small pup, of that he was also thankful as she was not yet coordinated enough to climb too high.

He was beyond thankful that she could not breathe fire. He did not know what he would do when she started to do that.

‘When dragons begin to breathe flames,’ He said to himself. ‘Yet another thing I do not know.’

He could not carry the dragon the way he could Ghost when he was a pup, but she released her grip on the tree as he pushed against her belly. He was glad she understood, he thought his back would snap the last time he attempted to lift her.

She seemed to enjoy his touch. She purred like some overgrown kitten when he sat with her and caressed her scales.

“If only you could be so calm the rest of the time,” He sighed as he walked towards their campfire.

He would be leaving shortly with Garret to reach Castle Black. He decided it would be best to leave Melisandre and Maro with Nyx and Ghost.

Nyx was much calmer around his direwolf, he was relieved to have discovered. He suspected it was because of the connection Jon had with Ghost, and by extension, that Ghost had with Nyx. He worried that the dragon would see the wolf as prey, but so far, she only seemed to want to play with Ghost. Those scenes were certainly adorable, no matter how strange they might have looked to anyone else.

He was only waiting for Garret and Ghost to return from their hunt before he would be departing for the Wall. He did not know how long he would be gone, and they had already learned that keeping Nyx well fed was one way of ensuring she is peaceful. Ghost and Garret were their best hunters, so Jon was hoping they would bring enough to last Nyx for the entire time he was at the Wall.

“My lord,” Melisandre greeted as he sat down by the fire. Maro only nodded at him before returning his gaze to the flames.

“My lady, Maro,” He replied, returning the man’s nod.

“Are you certain leaving is the best course of action, my lord?” Melisandre asked. “I will keep a fire burning for the dragon, and will ensure it is well fed but, I do not know if I can stop her from following you.”
That is why I am leaving Ghost with you, my lady. I believe, or rather hope, that she will be less inclined to follow me if a piece of me is still here,” He smiled at the confused look on Melisandre’s face. “I cannot explain it, but I feel confident in this decision. At any rate,” He said as he stroked the dragon’s neck, her head resting across his lap. “I don’t think we will be at the Wall for long. I do intend on making a few trips there before heading back to Winterfell, however.”

“That brings me to another question, my lord. What are we to do with the dragon when return to your home?”

That was something Jon had been worrying over.

Out here in the woods and trees, it was easy to conceal Nyx. He did not see how he could hide a dragon already of a size with the largest hounds in Winterfell. The fortress of the Starks was meant for wolves, not dragons.

“I will have to get a message to Lady Stark and ask her to meet with us when we are close, no,” He paused as he considered further. “You will go and fetch her once we are close enough. I do not expect her to be happy about it, but it would be preferable to us turning up with a dragon unannounced.”

Melisandre was silent for a few moments as she mulled over his words. He knew not to speak because she was rarely silent for long.

“I am sure she will be accommodating. You have already told her of my true reasons for being in her home,” She said with that same reverent voice. “And she knows the truth of you. Though, I do not know how that will make concealing a dragon any easier, my lord.”

Neither did Jon, but he felt it deep within him that he needed to keep Nyx a secret for as long as possible. He did not know how that would be possible if she grew to be as large as the dragons of old.

'Melisandre did say she was not the same as those dragons,' Jon thought. 'Maybe she will not reach such a size.'

“My lady, I do not understand the difference between Nyx and the dragons my ancestors rode,” He decided to pass the time by asking the question. He still intended to ask his uncle the same. “What makes her different to the likes of Balerion or Meraxes?”

“It is difficult to explain, my lord. I will try, though,” She replied, falling silent for a few moments to consider her words. “When your ancestors first discovered dragons, they were all like the one before us, but the Valyrians could not control them as easily as they would have liked. So, in time and with many failed attempts, they discovered a way of bending them to their will with the help of sorcery.” She took a deep breath as she continued her tale, Jon was intrigued. “Chief among these methods were horns, which were forged with blood magic from the bones of dragons, when blown they would allow the user to bend the will of any dragon unable to resist the call of the horn. I do not understand how they work; such magic is beyond mine own, but eventually those enthralled dragons were used to breed and lay eggs.” She looked at the dragon that was still purring under Jon’s touch. “For a century or so, those eggs hatched dragons that resembled your own but then they began to change. Your ancestors stopped actively hunting dragons to bend to their will and instead focused solely on breeding the ones they had. I do not know how long this went on for, but eventually the dragons they hatched were different from their parents. Thus, a new species of dragon was born.”

That sounded like a myth to Jon if ever he heard one, except that one of those original dragons was
currently being stroked by his own hand.

“But in what way were they different?” She still had not answered that question.

“Well, for one, their eggs are much smaller than the one your dragon hatched from. I have never seen one as large as hers had been.” She said with a nod to Nyx. “They also had four limbs, whereas yours has six. They were scaled, yes, but they still resembled lizards. Yours looks as if it has been birthed from the earth itself, and I do not believe any of those dragons had the veins that your own does.” She finished, indicating the patterns on Nyx’s body.

“And the fire breathing?” He asked. “Was that something only the newer species could do?”

“No, I do not think so.” Melisandre replied with a thoughtful expression. “I believe all dragons were capable of that, perhaps dragons such as your own could do so more powerfully. It is unclear just how much weaker, or stronger, the Valyrian dragons were compared to Primal dragons. I thought the name fitting, especially so now that she is born.” She said with a small smile.

He had to agree. Everything about the dragon felt ancient and powerful.

“I do not think she will breathe fire,” He said as he looked down at the now snoozing dragon. “She is still cold to the touch, I thought she would at least be warm if she were to breathe fire.”

“We still do not know enough of their development to be certain,” Melisandre replied calmly. “Maybe the fire comes after the first year? Maybe later? I do not know. The knowledge of hatching a dragon, at least a Valyrian dragon, is common knowledge to those who serve the Lord of Light. The development and training of those dragons, however, is not.”

“How would you hatch a Valyrian dragon egg?” He was curious about that.

“It is fairly simple, especially compared to how your own was hatched,” She smiled once more. “You still find it difficult to believe you did such a thing, don’t you?”

That was exactly what he was thinking as Melisandre said those words.

He should have remembered those white flames engulfing him, and the dragon that was on his chest in that inferno, more strongly than anything else that happened that night. It was the face he had punctured with his blade that filled his thoughts most of all. That and the horrifying experience he had in the realm of what Melisandre called The Great Other.

He did not know how he had caused the egg to ignite with that white fire, he had not been able to until the very last moment in the void, but he knew no one else could have done it. He resigned himself to the possibility of never having answers to those particular questions.

“So, how would a Valyrian dragon be hatched?” He asked again, not quite ready to discuss the events of that night.

Maro had also paled a little at Melisandre’s words, so he felt that avoiding talk of that night was best for him as well.

“It is placed in a fire, and routinely given blood by the one it would bond with. Eventually, when it has enough blood to sustain life, it hatches.” She said as if she were explaining how to knead dough.

“So, if Nyx had been one of those dragons,” He began. “Then you would have hatched her on the ship that brought you to the North? You said you fed your blood to the flames on the ship.”
“No, my blood could never give life to a dragon,” She replied. “It has to be the blood of Old Valyria, specifically of one of the forty families of Dragonlords. Your ancestors took great steps to ensure only the ruling families could wield the power of dragons.” She sounded bitter for the first time since he had met her. “It is how they were able to maintain power and enslave others for so long. Even though your dragon is not a Valyrian dragon, I still believe it takes special blood to hatch those dragons, the blood of the people you call the First Men. Your mother's blood.”

Sorcery was not something Jon could ever understand. His mind was spinning with the possibility of being descended from such people. He felt both amazed that the same blood flowed in his veins, but also disgusted with his ancestors for enslaving their fellow men. A part of him also felt pride and excitement at the thought of it being his mother's blood that allowed him to bring a dragon into the world. He wondered how she would react to seeing her son as he is now.

'Something else I can add to the growing list of things I do not know,' He thought miserably. 'I wish I could have known her. Both of them.'

“So, even if someone with the blood of Old Valyria were to find an egg, they would not be able to hatch it? No matter how pure their blood might be?” He asked in an attempt to prevent himself from falling too deep into misery.

“If they are not descended from one of the families of Dragonlords, then no.” Melisandre replied simply. “They could give every drop of blood they have to the egg, and it would remain as lifeless as they would become in their attempt to hatch it.”

Blood magic had a poor reputation even in the North. Slavery was also taboo in Westeros.

‘Mine own ancestors practiced both,’ Jon thought to himself with a shudder. ‘The Starks of old may have been as savage as direwolves in some tales, but slavery has had no place in Westeros for thousands of years.’

He may have only known her for just over a week, but he could already feel the bond he shared with Nyx. Whereas Ghost grounded him, she gave him the urge to explore himself. Ghost allowed him to take on the mind of an intelligent predator, he felt Nyx would eventually grant him something different.

The feeling that had been with him his whole life, that he was incomplete and would never be whole, was gone. He had not felt it ever since he stood from the spot where he had burned.

He believed it was not knowing who his mother was when he was younger, but even after he discovered her identity, he still felt that hole within him. Now, with his dragon and direwolf, the embodiments of the Houses that were his own – he felt complete and whole.

“Fire and Blood,” He said suddenly.

“My lord?” Melisandre asked a little surprised.

“The words of my father’s House,” He said to her. “They are ‘Fire and Blood.’ Most Houses use their words to boast, except for House Stark. House Targaryen’s words are not a boast either, they’re instructions.”

Melisandre did not reply, she merely looked at him in confusion.

Jon could not blame her, he did not understand why it mattered so much to him, either. He felt a certain amount of pride knowing that he was a member of two Houses that did not feel the need to boast. It was not something he ever believed he would feel, but he was glad to be doing so now.
'The oldest of the Great Houses and the former Royal House,' He said to himself, feeling the pride growing within him. ‘A wolf and a dragon.’

He was still a long way from healing, he knew that, but he felt hopeful that he would one day, whereas before he felt doomed to a life of confusion and misery.

'First, I have to tell Arya and the others the truth of who I am,’ He realised, his happy moment at an end as worry seeped in. ‘Assuming they do not reject me, I can then begin to work on coming to terms with all of the trauma these revelations have caused.’

A low chirp prevented him from falling too far into his anxiety. He could not help but smile as he looked at Nyx’s slumbering head in his lap.

‘At least I’ll have you and Ghost,’ He said to himself happily.

He felt the flutter of joy in his mind, and he knew that it was the dragon responding to him.

It removed the last traces of the anxiety that had been building up, and he smiled more fully than he had in a long time as he looked to the trees for the telltale sign on Ghost’s fur.

Chapter End Notes

So, the dragon is named Nyx.
It might not be what many would like for a dragon in this fic, but it just fits! I'm a fan of Greek mythology and the protogenoi are something I find fascinating!

Thanks to Brie88 for the suggestion!!!

I wanted to use this chapter to establish some differences between Nyx and Ghost, and how Jon feels them in his mind/spirit.
Also, I wanted to inject some adorableness into this story and felt this was a perfect opportunity to do so!

Finally, I wanted to use this chapter to add my own ideas to the lore behind dragons and their hatching. I've read quite a few fics that have blood being sacrificed to eggs, but I wanted to have a reason for why no one else is capable of hatching dragon eggs!

I'm eager to hear your thoughts on this!
“Why should we delay any longer?” Mace Tyrell whined.

They were once more in the gardens of the Red Keep. Her grandmother’s loyal guards keeping their little corner safe from prying eyes and eager ears – as much as possible in this city, at least.

Almost another moon has passed, and they still have yet to offer her hand to Joffrey. Her patience was wearing thin, made worse by the fact that she was not privy to her grandmother’s reasons for delaying.

“I agree with father,” Willas said to grandmother. “I do not understand why we delay. Lord Stark assured you last night he will not be changing his mind on the matter of his daughter being wed to the crown prince.”

“Yes, we have been here almost three moons, mother and we-“ Father started before grandmother decided she had had enough.

“And we will wait three more if needs be, Mace!”

“Why?” Margaery demanded before she could stop herself.

Olenna looked at her with that same calculating gaze she wore all the time now. Normally, Margaery would not push any further, but she was frustrated with the situation.

“You went to Lord Stark yourself and he all but confessed his reasons for refusing the King,” She continued. “As Willas said, he does not intend to change his mind. It is only a matter of time before the rest of the realm begin to send their daughters to the capital. Why must we delay further and risk losing the opportunity?”

Olenna remained silent for almost a minute after Margaery had finished speaking.

“You are right.” She finally said. “It is only a matter of time before the perfume of every eligible daughter is adding to the stink of this place. Mace,” She said to her son. “We must be discreet about this. Go and find the King and speak with him but be discreet. We do not know if he has received any ravens with proposals of marriage for the prince, and we do not want him to suspect us of having spies in his court.”

“Yes, mother,” Her father squealed with clear excitement as he rose from his chair. “I shall go immediately and speak with the King!”

“Do not offer Margaery’s hand this very day, Mace!” Olenna said sharply. “We need to work up to it, after we have discovered whether or not any other Houses have made similar proposals we will have to deal with. Do you understand?”

“Yes, mother, I understand,” Mace replied as pompous as ever.

“Be quick about it,” She said to dismiss her son.

Her lord father exited their corner so fast he tripped over his own feet, thankfully he did not fall flat
on his face. He was out of sight before Willas turned to their grandmother.

“I assume you wish to speak to us without father present?” He asked sounding slightly amused.

“Correct. What I am to tell you must be kept a secret,” She said looking evenly at her grandchildren. “I cannot trust your oaf of a father with it. I hope I am not wrong in assuming I can trust the two of you?”

“No, grandmother.” She and Willas said at the same time.

Another long silence followed with Olenna dividing her gaze between Willas and herself.

“I assume you have already told your brother about my visitor at Highgarden?” She asked Margaery. “And what we discussed since?”

She nodded. She had informed Willas of what their grandmother had told her in the hopes that he would help her figure it out. He made as much progress as she did.

“And you have not shared this with Loras?” She turned her attention to Willas.

“No, grandmother.” He answered.

“Very well,” Olenna said. “I believe a child of Rhaegar Targaryen lives.”

Grandmother had said the words so softly, they had to strain to hear them. Margaery was sure the entire realm could hear the silence that fell upon them.

“That’s not possible,” Willas said at last. “We all know what became of Rhaegar’s children. They were-“

“Yes, I know.” Olenna interrupted him. Even the Queen of Thorns could not speak of the horror that the Targaryen babes had fallen prey to. “I am not certain, but the evidence is beginning to pile up. My visitor at Highgarden said there was another with a stronger claim than the Mad King’s second son. That would only be true if Rhaegar has a surviving child.”

“If there was a child of Rhaegar’s still living, would they even have a claim to the Iron Throne?” Willas asked. “Robert overthrew the Targaryens and claimed it by right of conquest.”

“Well, that is where things get a little complicated,” Olenna replied with a smirk. “As I told you your sister, there could very well be great changes coming to the realm. We will not commit to a side until we know it will be the winning one.”

Margaery had remained silent ever since her grandmother’s words. Her mind was spinning at the possibilities, but each of them seemed highly unlikely.

“Is it,” She began slowly. “Is it possible that the babe, Aegon, was not Rhaegar’s son? That he was switched with another in case the Red Keep fell?”

“There is no way Elia Martell would have allowed one of her children to be swept to safety without the other,” Willas said immediately. “If they could remove Aegon from the Red Keep why not Rhaenys? Why not Elia Martell herself? Where is the sense in condemning innocent babes to death when the Targaryen children could be removed and sheltered elsewhere?”

His words made sense to Margaery. If she were a mother, she would not only choose to save one of her children, nor would she have condemned other children to die in their stead.
"If that were the truth, then it would be fairly obvious where this hidden dragon has been all these years," Olenna said. "Which makes it all the more unlikely it is the truth."

"Dorne?" Willas asked.

"Yes," Grandmother replied with a small nod. "They would not have allowed Robert to claim the throne if they had the crown prince's children in their midst."

"So, if not Dorne, then who would have hidden this supposed prince or princess?" Margaery asked. "The Targaryens across the Narrow Sea, perhaps?"

Olenna shook her head but did not say anything. She was clearly running through scenarios in her mind, so Margaery left her to it.

'Why would this mysterious man not tell her the full story?' She thought. 'He left her a trail to follow, surely he intends for her to see it through. Why bother if he would have her learn the truth anyway?'

A part of her wanted to believe that the Targaryen babes were secreted away, but she knew Willas spoke the truth of it. Even if they had been, two children were still dead – butchered by a monster on the orders of Tywin Lannister.

'We all know it to be true,' Margery said to herself with anger. 'No one is brave enough to confront him, though, and there is no solid evidence. Short of a confession from the Mountain, he will never face justice for his crimes.'

"Let us speak no more of this, my dears," Olenna said as she brought her attention back to her grandchildren. "We will get to the bottom of it eventually. Now, how goes it with Lord Stark, Willas?"

She could tell that her brother wanted to object, but he knew it would be pointless.

"I have not met with him in almost a fortnight," He began. "But I have no reason to believe he is deliberately avoiding me."

"I do," Olenna said, turning to look at Margaery. "You."

"Me?" She asked in surprise. "What could I have done?"

"He knows that your little visit to the common people was merely a ploy to shape his opinion of House Tyrell," Grandmother answered her.

'It was not all a ploy,' She thought, feeling a little saddened at the idea. 'I genuinely want to help those people. He must have seen that.'

As if hearing her thoughts, Olenna spoke once more.

"Worry not, my dear," Her voice was soothing. "He knows it was not all an act for his benefit. He was most concerned that we still intended to offer your hand to Joffrey, even though we know what a beast he is. Speaking of hands," She said as she turned to Willas. "We will soon offer your own to Lord Stark's eldest daughter."

"And why would he accept it? He knows we have attempted to manipulate him."

"He does, but that does not mean we have any less to offer." Grandmother replied. "You were able
to work out a profitable trade deal for the North. It would be more profitable to secure a permanent arrangement by marrying the heir of Highgarden to the daughter of the Lord Paramount of the North. He is not unintelligent; he will see the sense in such a match.”

Margaery could not help but feel a little envious of her brother. Lord Stark was an honourable man and she was certain his children would be as well. She did not know enough of his eldest daughter, Sansa, to have an opinion of her but she hoped to one day meet her.

‘If she is my goodsister, then I will get that wish,’ She thought to herself with a small amount of joy.

“What do you suggest?” Willas asked their grandmother.

“We will invite him to dine with us this evening,” Olenna said. “He may see the invitation for what it truly is, but I doubt he will refuse. Margaery,” She turned to her granddaughter. “You will extend the invitation to him.”

“As you wish, grandmother.”

She was not sure she wanted to speak with Lord Stark on her own, she felt a little embarrassed at the idea – especially now that he knows she attempted to manipulate him.

‘I am sure he will not hold it against me,’ She attempted to reassure herself. ‘If he saw through it, then why did he allow it to play out?’

She supposed she could ask him that, either at tonight’s meal or when she extended the invitation to said meal.

"Margaery," Grandmother's voice broke through her thoughts. "When you go to Lord Stark, my dear, do not be afraid to seize the initiative." She finished with an ominous note in her voice.

Margaery had yet to visit this part of the Red Keep.

She never had business that brought her to the Tower of the Hand until now, after all.

‘I should have suggested Loras to extend the invitation,’ She thought miserably as she panted up the many steps.

She was more than a little out of breath as she reached the door to Lord Stark’s study. The grim-faced northerner at his door nodded at her and knocked thrice on the wood.

“Lord Stark,” The guard called as he opened the door a crack. “Lady Margaery Tyrell is without.”

“Send her in.” Lord Stark’s voice called.

She smiled at the guard as he opened the door for her, and she entered the study.

“Lady Margaery,” Lord Stark greeted as he rose from his seat behind his desk. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“She comes to dine with us tonight,” Margaery said as she curtsied. “My family would like for you to join us at table tonight. Would you be willing to honour us with your presence?”

She did not feel entirely comfortable with the man, she could not help but think that he was attempting to decipher her every word.
‘As well he should,’ She thought. ‘He knows I have attempted to manipulate him.’

“I thank you for your invitation, Lady Margaery,” Lord Stark replied. “Though I am afraid I cannot accept this night. I am to dine with Lord Tyrion Lannister this evening, my lady.”

“I understand, Lord Stark. Perhaps another night?”

“Yes, of course,” He said politely. “Are you well, my lady?”

Was her discomfort so plain to see?

“I am, my lord. Only,” She decided being honest would be the best approach. “I confess, I am a little uncomfortable in your presence, Lord Stark. I am sure you must think of me as just another schemer in this-“

“Lady Margaery,” The Hand interrupted her. “You have done as much as every other highborn in this realm has done – attempted to have your House elevated. I cannot fault a daughter for wanting the best for her kin. And,” He looked her in the eyes as he continued. “It was not just another schemer I saw that day. I could see your care for the common folk was genuine, if that was another part of the lie, then you told it masterfully.” He smiled at her as he finished speaking.

She returned his smile with one of her own, it was one of the few she gave that had no double meaning behind it.

“I will not deny that I wish for my family to rise higher in the realm, Lord Stark. I do, however, intend for those who suffer to rise with mine own.” She could hear the resolve in her own voice, and she was sure Lord Stark could as well. “My actions may not be entirely honest, but my intentions are to improve the lives of everyone in the realm – no matter their birth.”

She was saying more than she should, but she felt she could trust the northern lord. He is another player in the game, but he was not like the others. He seemed to want what was best for the realm itself, not just the King or his own House.

‘A rare man, indeed.’ She thought, her respect growing for the Hand of the King.

“My lady,” Lord Stark began, he looked slightly uncomfortable. “Please, sit.” He indicated the chair in front of his desk.

She moved to sit as she was bid; it was a few moments after Lord Stark had resumed his own seat that he spoke.

“I may be overstepping here, Lady Margaery,” He said still looking uncomfortable. “I know your family intends to offer your hand to Joffrey. Your grandmother knows the character of the boy, as do I and I am certain you do as well.”

She nodded in reply but said nothing.

“Forgive me for being so bold, my lady, but you will not find any joy with him. My words might be considered treasonous, but he will not make a good husband.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “This is why I refused to wed my daughter, Sansa, to him. My best friend’s son he may be, but he is as unlike his father in character as he is in appearance.”

Lord Stark’s concern for her wellbeing was touching, but she could not allow sentiment to unravel the plans her family had worked so hard to bring forth. The words he had just used to speak of the crown prince were dangerous, even for the Hand of the King. She did not understand why he
would tell them to her now, when he clearly knew what he had just given her and her family.

“My lord, why would you say these things to me? My grandmother told you we would not hesitate to use them, should the need arise.” She felt a little ashamed as she said the words.

To her surprise the Hand merely smiled. Not a mocking smile, but a genuine one.

“My lord?” She asked, confused at his reaction to say the least.

“Your grandmother did tell me as much last night, yes,” He said with a solemn voice. “I do not doubt for a second that she would hesitate to swing the sword I have just placed in your hands. I do, however, believe that this,” He pulled out a scrunched-up piece of parchment from a pocket in his tunic. “Will give her reason enough to think twice before doing so. Would you mind returning it to her for me?”

She felt a rush of excitement as she accepted the crumbled parchment and smoothed it out on her lap.

She was disappointed. In place of words there was only a rough drawing of a wolf.

‘The sigil of House Stark,’ She was confused. ‘Why would this cause grandmother to hesitate?’

“Lord Stark,” She said, looking up from the drawing. “I do not understand. Why would this give my grandmother reason to hesitate?”

“Your grandmother had one of my guards give that to me last night, shortly after she left,” He explained. “She told him that she received it from a mutual acquaintance of ours. I did not know who she could be referring to, but I have given it a lot of thought today, and there is only one person she could be speaking of.”

“Who?”

“I am afraid, my lady,” Lord Stark said with an apologetic smile. “That I cannot tell you. Kindly return that to your grandmother and tell her that I can neither confirm nor deny her suspicions, though I would ask her to ensure they remain private suspicions.”

She could not help but feel frustrated as the man finished speaking. It was clear something was afoot, and that Lord Stark had a secret grandmother wished to know. Knowing that this was the note grandmother's visitor had left, the same note she refused to show Margaery, only added to her confusion.

‘Could this be related to her suspicions about a surviving child of Rhaegar Targaryen?’ The thought occurred to her. She would ask the Hand of the King, here and now, to see his reflexive reaction but such talk was not safe – especially here in the Red Keep.

“I will do as you ask, Lord Stark. Though, I do not understand what you hope to achieve.” She hesitated before speaking her next words, unsure of why she felt the urge to be so open. “Lord Stark, we invited you to dine with us tonight not just for the pleasure of your company, but–“

“I thought as much, my lady,” Lord Stark, no hint of anger in his voice. “I am not unaware of my reputation when it comes to social situations. What was the true reason for the invitation, if I might ask?”

She was not here for this. Her grandmother had charged her with inviting Lord Stark to table so that she could broach the topic herself. She could not explain why she felt so strongly about being
open with the man, and she was more than a little afraid of her grandmother’s reaction, but she
decided to go with her instincts.

‘Grandmother told me to seize the initiative, what if this is it?’ She asked herself, still uncertain.

“My family intends to propose a betrothal between my brother, Willas, and your eldest daughter.”
She said quickly before she could stop herself.

She was expecting Lord Stark to be furious; for him to rise to his feet and demand she leave and
send her lord father to him.

She had not been expecting yet another smile from the man.

“I assume this is the reason your brother has honoured me with his company so often, Lady
Margaery?” He asked, continuing after she had nodded in confirmation. “Unless your brother was
playing me false the whole time, I do believe he is a good man. Intelligent, courteous, I imagine he
would make a good match for my Sansa.”

She knew her eyes were probably as round as dinner plates, this was not the reaction she had been
expecting. She tried not to feel hopeful, but she could not deny the small amount rising within her.

“You would consent to such a match, Lord Stark?” She asked.

“I would have to write home and discuss it with my lady wife,” He said, a thoughtful expression on
his face. “She would see the sense in such a match, even without knowing of your brother’s
character. Let me be clear, Lady Margaery,” His gaze locked onto her own as he spoke. “I will not
force my daughter into this. The choice may be mine to make, but she will not be given off without
her consent. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lord Stark.” She was surprised at the man’s words. Her respect grew even more for him.

Her own lord father would never force her into a match, but that was because he intended for her to
marry the prince and because grandmother would never have allowed anything less. She had been
taught how to please her future husband and how to weather the less savoury aspects of marriage.
She knew the latter was not typically taught to highborn girls, but Olenna Tyrell was not the typical
grandmother.

“If my lady wife is agreeable,” He said in a softer voice. “I will ask your brother to travel to
Winterfell to meet with Sansa. Perhaps you could accompany him? That way you might see some
of the North.” He smiled as he finished speaking.

“I would like that,” She said genuinely. “May I inform my lord father and Willas of your
intentions?”

“You may, Lady Margaery,” He replied. “I daresay my lady wife will be overjoyed at having
secured a southern husband for our daughter. She was not keen on the idea of Sansa marrying a
northerner, for all she tried to hide it.” He chuckled fondly as he spoke.

“Well, I am confident Willas will prove to be a good husband, should the match be accepted.” She
said with a warm smile. “What are the men of the North like, Lord Stark? Most in the South do not
look upon them favourably, meaning no offence, my lord.”

“None taken, my lady,” Lord Stark said with a small laugh. “They have few kind words to say
about their southern counterparts. My lady,” He leaned forward as he spoke. “The North is
different from the other Kingdoms it shares this continent with. Our way is the old way, is a
common saying. The laws and rites of the First Men are still strong there, the Seven have little influence in my homeland. This causes many to see us as barbarians or savages, perhaps, but this is not the truth. There are good men and less good men in the North, the old ways are brutal, harsh and unforgiving; they have to be in a kingdom that is as equally brutal, harsh and unforgiving.” He paused to allow his words to sink in. “My family, the Starks, have always strived to put honour and loyalty before all else, and we hold those who would pledge themselves to us to the same standards. I cannot speak ill of my bannermen, but know that any who hold loyalty, true loyalty, to House Stark are the truest of all northmen. I can say no more than that, my lady.”

He smiled as the silence fell following his short speech.

She had not been expecting such an answer. The people of the North sounded much like the people of the South, despite Lord Stark’s words; plenty in the South hold loyalty and honour in high regard, and plenty more see those beliefs as weaknesses.

It only heightened her desire to see the largest of the Seven Kingdoms with her own eyes. She hoped her lord father would allow her to accompany Willas to meet his prospective bride, should Lady Stark be agreeable to the union.

 Thoughts of the betrothal she had suggested to Lord Stark brought her attention back to the situation.

“Lord Stark, I apologise for suggesting the betrothal to you. It is not my place to do so, I know it was improper for me to do so,” She took a deep breath before continuing. “My grandmother sent me here only to invite you to sup with us, where she intended for my lord father to propose the betrothal to you. I have overstepped, and I hope you forgive me that.”

“My lady,” He said kindly. “Truth be told, I was intending to write home and suggest it to my lady wife myself. Yes,” He said quickly as Margaery opened her mouth to speak. “I was aware of the reasons for your brother’s visits. Just as your little show in the city does not make you any less of a good person, your brother’s attempts to curry my favour does not make him any less of a good person.” His look darkened as he continued to speak. “After what my Sansa almost had for a husband, she could do much worse in a match than your brother, my lady.”

Her relief at hearing such words was dampened as she knew he was talking of the one she would have to marry before long.

‘What if he is worse than we know?’ She allowed herself to think. ‘What if all I have been taught is not enough?’

She knew she could not let doubt enter her mind, not at this stage of their plan, but she was still a woman with dreams and desires. Yes, most of those dreams and desires could be realised and met if she were the queen, but would she be happy?

In her heart, she knew the answer was no. No, she would not be happy married to the crown prince.

‘I can make others happy though,’ She said in an attempt to comfort herself. ‘I can improve their lives as the Queen. I will find what happiness I can in that.’

“Forgive me, my lady,” Lord Stark’s voice reached through her thoughts. “I did not mean to frighten you.”

“You did not, my lord. I have been well prepared for whatever manner of man I must one day marry,” She said with a confidence she did not entirely feel. “I should take my leave, Lord Stark. I
am sorry you will not be dining with us this evening. I have yet to meet Lord Tyrion.”

Of course, my lady,” Lord Stark said as he rose from his chair. “He has only just returned to court; he chose to stay behind when the rest of the Royal Family returned home. The North captivated him, it seems,” He chuckled as he spoke and walked her to the door. “I hope you find it to be as welcoming, should you accompany your brother to Winterfell, my lady.”

“I am sure I will,” She gave him another sincere smile as he opened the door for her. “I will inform my lord father of what we have spoken of, Lord Stark. I pray your lady wife is agreeable to the match,” She said hopefully.

“As do I.”

“Lord Stark.” She curtsied once more.

“Lady Margaery,” He replied with a bow.

‘If all goes well, at least Willas will have a marriage that he might find some happiness in,’ She said to herself as she began the long walk down the stairs. ‘I am sure the daughter of a man such as Lord Stark would make a fine wife for Willas; she might even help him see himself in a better light.’

Her happy imaginings of seeing her brother content were interrupted as she exited the Tower of the Hand and entered a courtyard of the Red Keep.

Striding across to her as though he owned the place, was the boy she might one day call her husband. She felt nothing but revulsion as she looked at him, but as she told Lord Stark only minutes ago – she would do her duty.

‘That will not make it any less unpleasant,’ She said as she fixed her smile on her face and greeted the crown prince.

Chapter End Notes

So, Olenna is firmly on the trail of the hidden Targaryen!
I decided to have her focused on this particular intrigue whilst the other characters deal with digging up other secrets (there are plenty in King’s Landing after all).
It will not (as many of you will expect) take her long to put the pieces together once she has them all in her head!

It makes no sense to me that Elia Martell would allow only ONE of her children to be ushered to safety. And if they could whisk them away without Aerys knowing, why did they need a replacement to die in their stead?

I used the latter half of this chapter to further establish a relationship between Ned and Marg - for reasons that I’m sure are pretty obvious!

The plot will be moving forward at a much faster pace from here on out, so expect time jumps and the like.

I will leave a note at the beginning of any chapter that has a significant time jump to avoid any confusion.
Thank you for reading and I look forward to your feedback :)

JON VIII

Chapter Notes

So, I made an error in this chapter.

Thanks to VisenyaSnow for pointing out the correct relation between Aemon and Rhaegar!

I'll correct it when I check through all the other chapters to tidy them up a little, so for now just be aware that I'm aware of my mistake!

Thanks once again VisenyaSnow for the correction!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Wall was truly an impressive sight to behold.

He could not help but feel small and insignificant as he looked upon the seemingly endless barrier.

“They say it stretches from East to West,” Garret’s voice reached through his awed silence. “You hear about its size enough, but it’s something else to see it with your own eyes, isn’t it?”

Jon shook his head and cleared his throat. He was there for a reason.

“You have the right of it, Garret,” He replied. “My whole life I’ve called the North home, I’ve heard many tales of the Wall but none of them could have prepared me for seeing it for the first time.”

They were within sight of the place he knew to be Castle Black. He was not sure what he was expecting, but the sight before him was not something he had imagined.

There were no walls surrounding the collection of buildings. Only the icy giant at its back.

‘They guard from the threats to the north,’ Jon said to himself. ‘They have no need for defences from the south.’

“What sort of castle has no walls, m’lord?” Garret asked.

“This one,” He said as he smirked at the man. “Unless they are too small for us to see from this distance.”

Garret laughed at his reply. They had become quite comfortable with one another as they journeyed to the Wall; Garret being one of the few to know Jon’s secret. He was devoted to the Red Woman’s God, so Jon did not doubt he would keep his silence since Melisandre informed him it is the Lord’s will. That did not prevent Garret from repeatedly whispering in awe of his true parentage.

He was not comfortable with having left Nyx and Ghost behind. He could explain a direwolf; he is a bastard of House Stark, after all. A dragon, however, there was no explaining that without at least one person connecting the dots.
As it was, Jon intended for only one at Castle Black to learn of his heritage.

“What brings you to the Wall, Sers?”

The man who spoke was dressed in the same garb he had seen his uncle in many times before. He stood where the gates would have been, had there been any walls to encircle the buildings.

“I have come to speak with your Maester,” Jon said. “We were attacked by Wildlings on our way here. At least,” They had already agreed to mention the men who attacked them. “We assumed they were Wildlings.”

The Watchmen merely looked at them, more than a little doubt on his face as his gaze flitted from Jon to Garret.

“What makes you so sure they were Wildlings, Sers?”

“I am no Ser. My name is-“ Jon began before another voice interrupted him.

“Let them pass, Morwyn. I know the young lad.”

Jon looked over to the nearest building and a flutter of excitement raced through him.

Striding over to him, clad in black, was his uncle Benjen.

‘This will go much easier with him here,’ Jon said to himself with no small amount of relief. ‘Thank the Old Gods he was not ranging Beyond the Wall.’

“Uncle,” Jon said as he dismounted and embraced his uncle. “I am glad to see you here.”

“You sound surprised, this is my home, after all,” His uncle replied, turning to his sworn brother. “I’ll take charge of them from here, Morwyn. As you were.”

The man, Morwyn, merely grunted and walked away. Even in his thick furs he was shivering.

“This is Garret,” Jon said, gesturing to the man at his side. “He knows, uncle. We can speak freely around him.”

Benjen looked at Garret with obvious suspicion, but he must have decided to take Jon’s word for it as he offered his hand to the man.

“Well met, Garret. The name’s Benjen.”

“Good to meet you, m’lord.” Garret replied.

Benjen turned back to Jon and gestured towards the centre of the collection of buildings.

“I knew you’d come before long,” He spoke quietly as they walked. “I’ll be heading out Beyond the Wall on the morrow, so I’m glad you picked today to visit. I assume you’re not just here to see my pretty face?”

“No, uncle,” He said with a small laugh. “I much prefer the face I see in the looking glass.”

“That does not surprise me. The fairest maiden in all of Westeros, that’s what they should call you,” He replied with a grin on his face. “I trust you’ll ensure all the realm knows of his status, Garret?”
Garret allowed himself a light chuckle but made no reply.

‘He probably considers my uncle’s words to be offensive,’ Jon thought. ‘Melisandre has him so convinced I’m this Promised Prince, he does not even allow himself to take part in playful mockery.’

“All joking aside,” Benjen said as they reached the courtyard. “Are you here to see who I think you are?”

“I am, uncle. I admit, I am surprised you never mentioned him before.”

“If I had known he and I shared kin, I would have,” Benjen replied, loud enough so that only Jon could hear him. “Until that night in Winterfell, he was just the Maester of Castle Black who happened to be a Targaryen. He is a good man, there is no question of that. Now, I heard the last bit about Wildlings. Is that true or just some ruse to gain entry here? You need not have bothered.”

“It is true, uncle,” Jon said, he was a little stung that Benjen would think he would lie about such a thing. “Four of them attacked us in the middle of the night. We do not know for sure if they were Wildlings, but who else would be wandering this far North?”

Benjen looked out towards the direction Jon and Garret had arrived from. A thoughtful expression briefly crossed his face, before he looked back at Jon.

“Where do you think they were headed? I’ll need to send out a party to capture them before they encounter some defenceless folk and—”

“They’re dead.” Jon said flatly.

Benjen did not say anything, he just looked at Jon with an unreadable expression.

‘Does he see a killer now, where he once saw only his nephew?’ Jon wondered as the seconds passed by.

“Did you—“ He began to ask.

“Yes.” Jon said before Benjen could finish the question. “I would rather not discuss it, not yet.”

“I understand, Jon, but,” Benjen paused to take a deep breath. “The Lord Commander will need to hear of this.” He looked at Garret with yet another thoughtful expression. “Tell you what, your man and I will go and speak with the Old Bear. You can speak with the Maester alone and your friend doesn’t have to wait in the cold. It’s only right.”

Jon was relieved. That was more than he could hope for.

“Does he know?” He could not help but ask. “About me? How will I convince him the truth?”

“I told him, in as few words as possible, that he would most likely be receiving a visitor with a strange tale to tell,” Benjen said as he began to lead Jon up a flight of stairs. “He is the smartest man I have ever met, Jon. I would not be surprised if he has already put the pieces together. Here we are.”

They stopped outside of what was clearly the Maester’s study. He could hear no movement from within, but it had the same familiar scent as Maester Luwin’s back in Winterfell.

“I do not know what to say,” He said as he turned to his uncle. “I have only just accepted it myself
and it took—“ He stopped himself before he could speak of Nyx.

He did not want to hide it from his uncle, but he knew it was not the right time to speak of her.

“I know, lad,” Benjen said kindly as he placed a hand on Jon’s shoulder. “But try and find the words. He is an old man, and this might be your only chance to speak with him. He deserves to know he is not alone, even if he only knows it for a few more moons.” Benjen knocked on the door and opened it to stick his head in. He called to someone in the room, and then came back out of it.

“Making sure it’ll be just the two of you,” He explained.

A man with more than a few boils on his face came out of the Maester’s study. He did not look happy about having to leave the warmth, if his expression was anything to go by.

“Good lad, Chett,” Benjen said to the man. “Go along to the hall if you need to keep warm. I’m sure the Maester will send for you when he has need of you.”

The man, Chett, merely grunted before looking at Jon and Garret suspiciously as he stomped off.

“Go on, Jon,” Benjen encouraged with a nod to the open doorway. “Don’t let all the warmth out. When I say old, I mean old.”

And with that he and Garret departed, heading for wherever the Lord Commander’s quarters were in this place. Left with no other choice, he headed into the study that was a welcome relief from the biting cold.

‘I hope he does not react the way I did when I first learned the truth,’ Jon said as he crossed the threshold. ‘The shock may very well kill him with how old they say he is.’

He expected to find the old Maester abed, too weakened by age to sit up unaided.

He was surprised to find the man seated before the fire; he certainly looked old, and Jon could tell that his days of moving freely on the Wall were well behind him, but he did not give off an air of feebleness. Jon could only feel a subtle, but powerful, energy radiating from him.

He was even more surprised that the man’s eyes, clearly unseeing, were fixed solely upon Jon as he entered the Maester’s study.

“I presume,” The man said before Jon could find his tongue. “That you are the visitor young Benjen told me I should expect.” His smile was kind and welcoming, it made Jon feel a little more at ease.

“I-I,” He cleared his throat, he was not sure how to begin. “I do not know how to—“

“The future unfolds so many times in our minds, yet when the moment is upon us, we are usually at a loss for words.” The old man said before Jon could mumble himself hoarse. “You are not the first to have an entire speech committed to memory, only for it to escape you when your audience is before you. You may take a seat, if you wish.” He gestured to the chair opposite his own.

Jon moved to take the seat offered to him. He was even less certain of what to say after hearing the Maester’s own words.

‘I had no speech committed to memory in the first place,’ Jon thought. ‘Is this how my uncle felt, that night in the Godswood?’
Jon felt a rush of sympathy for the man who raised him.

“Might I ask your name, young man?”

“Jon. Jon Snow, Maester,” He said. “Benjen Stark is my uncle.”

“Ah, I see.” The Maester replied. He turned his eyes towards the fire as if he could gaze upon the flames. He looked thoughtful.

Jon did not know how to break the silence that followed, so he used the opportunity to try and think of a way to tell this old man that they were kin.

‘He has thought himself the last of his family in Westeros for almost twenty years,’ Jon said to himself. ‘Why would he believe me when I tell him otherwise?’

He wished Benjen was there with them, so that he might help him find the right words.

“Did my uncle tell you why I would be calling on you, Maester Aemon?” Jon asked, finally breaking the silence.

Aemon slowly turned his head away from the fire and fixed his eyes once more upon Jon. Even though he knew the old man could not see him, he could not find it in himself to look away.

“When he returned from his visit to Winterfell, he seemed angry and hurt. It is my duty as a Maester to care for my charges, whether their wounds be of the body or the mind,” Aemon said slowly. “Your uncle came to me, the very same night he returned and told me that you would be visiting with me before long.” The Maester cleared his throat with obvious difficulty. “Young man, might I trouble you to bring me some water? It is on my desk, I believe.”

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“Of course,” Jon said, standing to make his way to the desk.

He poured some water into one of the cups on the desk and made his way over to the Maester.

“Here you are, Maester,” He said, placing the cup in his hand. “Do you need anything else? Shall I fetch your steward for you?”

The Maester took a sip of water before answering with a knowing smile.

“Do you imagine the time it takes for you to find him, for him to arrive and for me to dismiss him will be enough for you to find your words, young man?”

He could not help but chuckle in response.

‘For all that his eyes do not see,’ He thought. ‘He does not miss much else.’

“I assume you do not need anything,” Jon said, feeling a little less nervous as he sat down again.

“Water will suffice, thank you,” Aemon replied with another gentle smile. “Are you in need of anything?”

‘To be gifted with words would really be useful right now,’ He wanted to say.

He knew he did not have unlimited time with the Maester. He would most likely have to speak with the Lord Commander to further explain the Wildlings.

He took a deep breath and decided to just say what he came here to say.
“Benjen is not my only uncle here at Castle Black,” Jon said quickly before he could stop himself. “You are also my uncle,” He paused to gather his thoughts. “My great-great uncle, that is.”

He felt a little self-conscious as the silence fell once more. The Maester gave no outward reaction, which only added to Jon’s unease. He wondered if Aemon was feeling anger or confusion, or even both.

Jon could not make sense of his own feelings when his uncle had told him the truth. It was enough to send him into the realm of the Gods.

Aemon was made of stronger stuff than Jon, it seemed. When he spoke, his voice was as clear as it had been before Jon’s declaration.

“If Benjen Stark is your uncle,” Aemon said slowly. “And I am your great-great uncle then that would mean your father could only be Rhaegar. The eldest son of my brother’s son. Is that what you would have me believe?”

‘He does not believe me,’ Jon thought. ‘Of course, he does not. Why would he?’

“I know it sounds impossible, Maester. I am no liar, I assure you,” He said as quickly as he could. “Benjen and I only learned of this a few moons ago, whilst he was at Winterfell. I have no proof to offer you other than my word and that of my uncle Benjen.”

He did not feel the need to say anything else. He should have made more of an effort to plan his words and arguments; it was foolish of him to come here so unprepared.

“And your mother would be Lyanna Stark, correct?” Aemon finally asked.

“Yes.” Jon replied, aware of the pride he heard in his voice.

The silence that fell was broken by the door opening. Jon was on his feet, afraid of what their visitor might have heard. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Benjen, but that relief left him as he took note of the larger man behind him.

“Jon, this is Lord Commander Mormont,” Benjen said, gesturing to the man. “He’s come to speak with you about the Wildlings you encountered.”

“Very well,” Jon said, he did not see how he could refuse the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch in his own castle. “I will-”

“Lord Commander,” Aemon’s voice silenced him and drew the attention of the three men. “Might I ask you to delay this discussion? Jon and I were having one of our own. It is of equal importance to the matter you wish to discuss with the boy, Lord Commander.”

Jon was surprised when he heard the Lord Commander grunt in response to the Maester’s words.

“So be it, mind you don’t keep him long,” His voice was firm and commanding, but there was a trace of softness in it for the Maester. “Those Wildlings could have been part of a larger band for all we know. Come on, Benjen, let’s leave them to it.”

“Actually, Benjen, I would prefer you to stay. It would make things much easier.” Aemon said.

His uncle Benjen looked at the Lord Commander. He only shrugged before heading out of the door.
“I assume Jon has told you, Maester Aemon?” Benjen asked as he drew himself up a chair to join them.

“He has told me that he is the child of my great nephew, yes,” Aemon said. “It would fill me with joy to know that I am not the last of my family in Westeros, yet you will understand if I do not merely take your word for it, I’m sure?”

Jon would not have believed it if a stranger had come to him claiming kinship, but he was doing just that with this man he had met not even an hour ago.

Benjen must have been thinking along the same lines as his nephew. He was more familiar with the Maester, however, so he had no issue with speaking to the man.

“Any man would be suspicious of such claims, you’re not wrong to doubt him,” He said slowly. “I know it to be true. I will tell you what my brother told Jon and myself, unless you would rather tell him?” He asked Jon.

Jon just shook his head; his voice had escaped him once again.

“Very well,” Benjen cleared his throat before beginning the tale. “At the end of the rebellion, Ned and some of his allies went in search of our sister, Lyanna. We all thought Rhaegar took her against her will and for that my eldest brother, Brandon, rode down the King’s Landing demanding justice. I believe you know how that ended? I have no wish to speak of it.”

“I am aware, Benjen,” Aemon said. “You need not trouble yourself with those memories on my account.”

“So, Ned and the men accompanying him eventually made their way to a broken tower in the Red Mountains of Dore. I don’t know how they knew to go there, but that is where they found the last three members of the Kingsguard. A fight ensued and only my brother and Howland Reed, a Stark bannerman, survived.” Benjen took a moment to gather his thoughts, Jon knew what the next part of the story was, and it made him all the more thankful he was not the one telling it.

“My brother entered the tower and found my sister just before she died. The childbirth was not easy, and the conditions were not suitable for living in much less birthing a child. That is how Ned described it, at least.” Benjen looked at Jon before continuing. “The babe my sister died to bring into this world is the man sitting before you. I swear it, Maester Aemon.”

Aemon remained silent as Benjen finished speaking. His expression was hard to discern, but Jon could see tears were starting to well up in his eyes and a thought occurred to him.

“They loved one another,” He said to the Maester, unsure of his reasons for telling him so. “There was no rape, they married in secret. I-“

“I know.” Aemon said at last, once more rendering Jon speechless.

He looked at Benjen in shock to see the same expression on his face. Neither of them had been expecting this.

“How is-” Benjen began.

“I have been without sight for a long time, Benjen,” Aemon spoke over him. “Not long enough that I was not able to correspond with my family. I thought myself the only one who knew Lady Lyanna was not taken against her will. I assure you,” He said with a raised hand, somehow sensing Benjen bristle at his words. “Had I known that others were aware, I would not have held my
silence. I am sorry I could not give you the comfort the truth would have granted you, Benjen.”

Aemon wiped away the budding tears from his eyes, he cleared his throat before continuing with his own tale.

“Rhaegar was convinced his children would play a part in a great prophecy. He knew he must have three, and when his wife, Princess Elia, learned that she would not birth another child, Rhaegar was lost. That is,” He fixed his eyes on Jon as he spoke. “Until he met your mother. Rhaegar’s marriage to Elia was not one of love; he cared for her, yes, but there was no romance, only duty. Elia gave her blessing to the union between Rhaegar and your mother, with certain conditions. You know the rest of this story; we need not speak of how it ends.”

Jon was grateful for that. He did not know what to say as the silence fell once more, but the more he thought about, the more he realised that only one thing mattered.

“You believe me?” He asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

“I do,” Aemon said as a smile spread across his face and the tears began to fall.

Jon breathed a sigh of relief, aware of his own eyes feeling watery. He did not allow himself to imagine that it would take only a single conversation, but Aemon was already aware of half the story.

“Benjen,” Aemon said, his voice shaking. “In my bedchamber, there is a loose panel in the left corner. Bring the contents within the hidden space here, if you would.”

Benjen rose and made for the door to the right of Aemon’s desk.

Aemon rose as well, less fluidly than Benjen, but he seemed steady on his feet.

“I wonder if I might embrace you, Jon?” He asked softly. “I never believed I would ever have the chance to embrace my own kin in this life.”

Jon said nothing. He simply stood and closed the small distance between him and Aemon and encircled him in his arms.

The tears began to fall more freely as his uncle’s arms embraced him, both were shaking with suppressed emotion as they stood there in silence.

After what felt like hours, they broke apart as Benjen had entered the room with an assortment of objects.

“Here you are, Maester,” He said as he placed them on the floor in the space between the three chairs and the hearth.

There was an assortment of letters, bound together with a black ribbon. A long object wrapped in a faded black cloak. The final object was a wooden chest with the sigil of House Targaryen.

“These are yours, Jon,” Aemon said, waving his hand over the objects he could not see. “The letters are the correspondence I shared with your father. I hope they will help you learn a little more of the man we both never had the fortune to meet.”

Aemon lowered himself into his seat and bent forwards to feel for the wrapped object. Benjen, seeing this, picked it up himself and gently placed it in Aemon’s lap.
“Thank you, Benjen,” He said as he sat back in his seat. “This is also yours, Jon. Take it.”

Jon leaned across and lifted the bundle from his uncle’s lap. It had a certain weight to it, but it was not overly heavy. He felt a surge of excitement as he unravelled the dusty cloak. He gasped when he laid eyes on the object that must have been hidden for some time.

“Is this—” He began in awe.

“It is.” Aemon confirmed.

“Impossible.” Benjen whispered.

The blade had the distinctive ripples of Valyrian Steel, the same Jon had seen countless times on Ice. These patterns seemed to be darker but shone the brighter for it when the light caught the blade. The cross-guard was gold and shaped like a flame fluttering out each side. A medium-sized ruby lay in the centre of it. The handle was black with a swirling gold pattern working its way through. It was as black as the cloak Benjen wore. The pommel was a collection of golden flames, looking as if they had been frozen and attached to the rest of the hilt.

“Dark Sister,” He whispered with a voice full of awe and wonder.

Jon held it reverently. He could not believe this was real even though he could feel the weight of it in his hands. He looked at his uncle Benjen and could see the wonder and awe in his own eyes.

“How?” He managed to ask Aemon, who was smiling at the sight he could not see.

“It was brought here by the last person to wield it,” He said. “He left it in my care, before he departed for the Lands Beyond the Wall. That was the last time I ever saw him.” He finished with a hint of sadness in his voice. “Perhaps you could allow your uncle to marvel at the blade, there is one more thing for you.”

Jon held Dark Sister out to his uncle, who took it as though it were a new-born babe. It was somewhat endearing to see his uncle’s face so full of childlike wonder. Jon could not help but grin.

He kneeled down and opened the chest, and as he took note of the contents, his grin faded.

“Another one,” He said with both awe and weariness in his voice.

“Another one what?” Benjen asked as he leaned over to look in the chest. “Gods be good, is that—”

“A dragon egg, yes,” Aemon said slowly. “Jon, what did you mean when you said another one? That was not the reaction I was expecting.”

Jon looked from the egg to his uncle Aemon, his face remaining neutral despite his question. Benjen’s face, he saw as he turned to look at him, was showing enough confusion, shock and wonder for the three of them.

“There is something I need to tell you both,” He sighed. “You might want to sit down, Uncle Benjen.”

Chapter End Notes
The tag IS Jon has Dragons! :)

I got the description for Dark Sister from the wiki. I hope I didn't butcher it haha

I did plan on making this scene a little more emotional, but it didn't feel right to go full out in their initial meeting (I do plan on having them meet again, yes SPOILERS)

The next Jon chapter will be the second part of this one :) I didn't want it to be too long!

Thanks for reading and I look forward to your feedback :)
“Never thought I’d be playing nursemaid to a fucking dragon.”

Maro’s words brought Melisandre out of her reverie.

Jon’s dragon had hatched over a week ago now, but Melisandre doubted she would ever get used to seeing it.

‘Her,’ She reminded herself. ‘The Lord’s champion insists the dragon is a she.’

Melisandre was pleased to know that Jon was already bonding with the mount he would ride in the night to come. She did not fully understand how it worked; it was magic beyond her own. She was completely baffled by the connection the Lord’s champion shared with his direwolf.

The way he described it to her, when she asked, was simple enough in words.

The white direwolf was an extension of Jon; the link was constant and required no effort to maintain. She had learned of this branch of magic in her studies at the Red Temple. Warging, it was called; a power that was gifted to certain men by the Old Gods. Knowing of it was not the same as understanding it.

Jon’s bond with the black dragon, however, did not sound like a warg bond. He could feel a connection with her that required no words, but it was not constant and took a lot of effort to maintain. He believed in time the bond might grow to the same level as the one he had with his direwolf.

He summed it up by saying that Ghost, his direwolf, accepted him without question when he tried to enter his mind. Nyx, his dragon, sometimes fought his intrusion and attempted to reverse it, somehow.

It was enough to confuse Melisandre, and that was not an easy feat to achieve.

Her gaze was currently fixed on the sleeping pair before her. The white direwolf had no fear of the dragon. The dragon also had yet to display any hostility towards Ghost. They looked peaceful on the ground where they slept; one of Nyx’s wings was draped over the wolf and the wolf’s paw was resting on the scales of the dragon’s neck.

It was certainly an endearing sight, but Melisandre wrested her gaze away from it to speak with her companion. She had questions she would ask of him, and now was the perfect opportunity for her to do so.

“No, nor I,” She said in reply to his question. “Though I have seen stranger things this past week or so. Why did the flames not burn you?” She decided to be direct, knowing that Maro was of the same inclination.

He stiffened as he allowed his eyes to rest on her. She could tell that this was probably the last thing he wanted to discuss, but Melisandre wanted to know. If this man shared some connection with the Lord’s champion, she must know what that connection is.
“I haven’t the faintest idea,” He said with obvious reluctance. “Were it not for my eyes seeing the bloody thing, I would not have noticed any flames. There was no heat to them, none at all.”

Jon had said the same thing, but she was not surprised he would be immune to flames of his own making. Maro, on the other hand, had no part in bringing forth that unnatural fire.

‘So then how is it he could withstand them?’ She asked herself.

“You say there was no heat, Jon has said the same, yet when I attempted to remove the egg from the brazier I felt the pain of burning nonetheless, though,” She held out her arms as she spoke, examining them for burns she knew she would not find. “They left no mark on my flesh. I felt the pain, but my body bears none of the evidence.”

“I felt nothing,” Maro replied, his voice losing some of the reluctance. “I’ve no head for sorcery, I’m no fire priest if that’s what you’re thinking – not that it did you any good.” He gestured at her unburnt hands. “I expected to be cooked meat when I hefted the egg out of the flames, but there was nothing. No heat, no pain. Nothing.”

That was not what she wanted to hear but she knew he was speaking the truth. The Lord of Light responded with silence when she asked him to reveal the truth to her, she looked into the flames just as she would every night and nothing would be revealed to her. It was maddening to have discovered she is the one to guide his Champion in the Great War, yet to be as in the dark as the forces of light shall be during the nights to come.

“It was only when it was the egg that was burning, though,” Garret continued. “When Jon went up in flames, I felt the heat then, oh yes.”

‘That is interesting,’ She said to herself. ‘Why only when the egg was burning?’

“Have you had any dealings with the Lord of Light?” She asked. “In one of the Free Cities, perhaps?”

“If by dealings you mean scoffing at whatever sermons you red priests blurt out in markets and the like, aye,” He chuckled. “I’ve no love for your Lord of Light, I’ll tell it true.”

“Do you have love for any God?” She had not asked him before.

“No longer,” He replied shortly. “And none that would protect me from fire, let alone whatever the fuck those white flames were.”

She did not attempt to question him further about his beliefs, not right now. She could tell that he was as curious as she was about his ability to withstand the flames, which meant that he had no answers for her.

‘None that he is aware of, at least,’ She reasoned. ‘The flames had no heat only when they were originating from the egg, but he felt the heat when Jon erupted in those same white flames. Why?’

She could not recall the events of the night the dragon hatched without the feeling of awe washing over her. Some of the more powerful followers of the Lord of Light could create shadowflame, but that was not what Jon had done. Shadowflame burned as black as night and burnt the spirit of its victims, but it posed no risk to any who had received the Lord’s blessing.

‘Perhaps the pain I felt was not my body burning, but my spirit?’ The idea suddenly occurred to her. ‘Could it be some form of shadowflame then? Jon called it forth in the realm that is home to the Old Gods and The Great Other before he did in this one. What changed?’
Her gaze landed on the dragon as she asked herself that question.

She knew that the blood Jon had been giving to the egg was also giving it his power. She could not explain how she knew, but she was certain she was correct. That was the only explanation she could think of that allowed The Great Other to almost corrupt the Lord’s champion.

He could not call on those flames to protect him because he had given the power to do so to the dragon. It was only after the egg touched his body that he was able to call them forth.

Jon had described the events that took place whilst in The Great Other’s grasp. She knew there were parts he left out, but he explained how he was able to at last call upon his fire to escape the corrupting embrace of the Lord’s greatest enemy.

“What are you thinking?” Maro’s voice brought her out of her musings.

“That night,” She said as she turned her gaze back to him. “I have seen many miracles performed with fire, I’ve performed some myself and yet,” She looked at her hands as she paused. “I have never seen nor heard of white fire. I am not wholly immune to flame, only to those I bless or shadowflame. A flame that burns only the spirit, leaving the body untouched.” She elaborated in response to Maro’s raised eyebrow.

“And you think that’s what Jon did?”

“I am not sure. Shadowflame is black and is costly for even the most powerful of my brothers and sisters. Yet the blessings of R’hllor are mine, it should not have burned me.”

“I’ve no blessings from your God, not unless you’ve been preaching over me whilst I sleep,” He allowed himself a small laugh before continuing. “So why did it not burn my spirit to ashes?”

She had no answer for that. Only the foulest of magic dealt with the manipulation of the spirit.

Shadowflame would leave the body unharmed, but the spirit would be gone entirely. There would no life in another realm, nothing. That is why the punishment is reserved for only the most heinous of crimes and to her knowledge only two have ever received such a punishment. Though, their names were erased just like their spirits.

She was not familiar with other forms of spirit magic, but perhaps Maro had encountered a practitioner and the result had left his spirit changed but not destroyed?

‘It is no good speculating on the unknowable,’ She decided. ‘I will consult the flames as I always do; the Lord will reveal the answers to me if it is his will.’

“I have no answers for you, Maro,” She replied. “I can only invite you to look to the flames and ask the Lord of Light to reveal the truth to you.”

Maro merely grunted and silence fell upon them once more, punctured only by the breaths of the two sleeping creatures before them.

‘All will be revealed in time,’ She reassured herself. ‘The Lord has chosen his champion, as have the Old Gods of this land. He has his mount. The truth will follow when the time is right.’

Night had fallen by the time Jon and Garret returned.

It was just as well they did, the direwolf was growing restless as was the dragon. The moment Jon
appeared in their campsite the dragon rushed over to him whilst the direwolf disappeared into the trees.

‘No doubt to hunt,’ She said as she turned from the brazier to greet the Lord’s champion.

“My lord,” She said with a small bow of her head. “I trust your visit with your kin went well?”

She only noticed then, as the dragon finally stopped her attempt to climb up Jon that he was not empty-handed.

“It did, in a sense,” He replied cryptically. “We will not be returning to Winterfell. Not yet.”

“What are those?” She asked, indicating the long package in his left hand and the small chest under his right arm.

“This,” He said as he lifted the long package. “Is an ancestral weapon of my House. And this,” He shook the chest under his arm. “Is another dragon egg.”

Her eyes went wide as he said these words. The weapon was of no interest to her, she knew Lightbringer would eventually find its way into his hand. Another dragon was not something she had anticipated; she had heard no rumours of eggs this side of the Narrow Sea.

“How?” She asked calmly. “I assume your kin gave it to you, but how did he come to have it in the first place?”

“A previous Lord Commander, another ancestor of mine, left it and the sword with my uncle before he went Beyond the Wall,” Jon explained as he moved to sit before the brazier. “I was not expecting it. I did not expect him to believe me when I told him the truth of who I am, but he already knew half of the story.”

He placed the concealed sword and the chest containing the dragon egg on the ground beside him. As soon as his hands were free the dragon all but climbed on him, demanding attention.

“Before you head back to the Wall again on the morrow, you’ll need to have your wolf get more meat for her,” Maro said, gesturing at the dragon that was now purring as Jon stroked her head. “She’s had every bit we gathered for her.”

“We will not be going back to the Wall,” Jon said.

“You said we would not be returning to Winterfell yet, my lord.” Melisandre was confused. “You said you would be making a few trips to the Wall. Where are we to go if not Winterfell?”

Jon did not answer immediately, he looked lost in thought as he was staring at Nyx’s head in his lap. She turned her gaze to Garret who had yet to say a word thus far.

“I know nothing, m’lady,” He said with a shake of his head. “M’lord has not spoken since we left the Wall, other than to say he did not wish to speak.”

“My lord?” She asked, sitting down on the ground. “What has happened?”

She was concerned for the Lord’s champion. Despite the power she could feel radiating from him, he was still just a man and he had been through much in the past few moons. There was only so much even the strongest of men could take before breaking.

“Do you remember what you said to me in the Godswood?” He asked suddenly. “About uniting
the realm to fight in the wars to come?"

“I do,” She answered, unsure of where he was going with this.

“Well, my uncle shares your belief,” He said flatly. “If we are to stand a chance, any chance at all, then this realm must be united. That is what he said, in so many words.”

Jon looked at her with clear reluctance in his eyes, but as he held her gaze, she saw it melt away to be replaced by conviction.

He opened his mouth to speak but the dragon’s sudden movement caused him to cry out in alarm.

“What are-“ He began. “Stop that!”

Nyx was biting furiously at the chest that contained the dragon egg. She was screeching as she attempted to bite her way through it, this was not like the dragon at all. She was far from tame, but she had yet to act so feral.

“Stop that,” Jon said once more, but the dragon did not stop. “Leave it alone or you’ll-”

He closed his eyes and a look of intense concentration came upon his face. After a few moments the dragon calmed and moved away from the chest. Maro and Garret relaxed slightly but remained on edge, she could see Maro fingering the hilt of his dagger as he eyed Nyx warily.

Jon opened his eyes and snatched up the chest quickly. The dragon made no move to resume her assault, but her eyes never left it.

Jon looked at her again, worry evident in his features.

“Has she attacked Ghost or any of you?” He asked nodding to her and Maro.

“No, my lord,” She answered as Maro shook his head. “She has been manageable and easily placated with meat the whole day. The egg,” A thought occurred to her. “It must be a Valyrian dragon egg you have in that chest.”

“Why would that cause Nyx to attack it?”

“They are not the same species, my lord,” She explained. “They may be dragons but that it where the similarities end. Have you ever heard of a dragon they called The Cannibal?”

Jon nodded.

“This is the daughter of that dragon,” She said as she gestured at Nyx who was still eyeing the chest. “And you know why they called her parent The Cannibal, yes?”

Again, Jon only nodded, he looked amazed despite the worry that was still on his face.

“It seems the parent may have passed on its taste for dragon eggs to the offspring.”

“So, then what am I to do?” Jon asked. “I cannot guard this egg constantly and soon enough she may well be too large to stop.”

She had an idea, but she knew Jon would not like it.

“The same as you did with her own egg. Give your blood to it,” She said with a confidence she did not entirely feel. “It need not be as often as you did with Nyx, but just enough to hopefully
convince her that this egg is a part of you. We will not place it in a fire; I do not think it a good idea
to have a Valyrian dragon around her when she is still so young.”

As she expected Jon’s face fell after hearing her words. She knew the culture he was raised in
abhorred blood magic, but it would be necessary to ensure this second dragon remains safe. She
had no doubt that the Lord intended for him to hatch it, else he would not have put it in his path.

Jon merely nodded and knelt to open the chest, he kept his back to them and ensured Nyx could not
see the egg. He drew his knife from his belt and must have cut slightly above his wrist and so she went to their cart to find bindings for his wound.

‘We may not need them,’ She thought. ‘The last wounds were healed the very next day.’

Jon kept the chest with him as she worked over his cut. When it was done, he looked warily at the
dragon that had curled up under the brazier to sleep.

“How do you know The Cannibal was her parent?” He asked Melisandre.

“Because it was next to that dragon’s remains that I found her egg, my lord,” She answered with a
smile, remembering the joy she felt when she found it.

“And,” Jon cleared his throat. “How big were those remains? Is she like to grow as large?”

She looked around but had nothing to serve as a reference, so instead she pointed at herself.

“I am a tall woman, but the skull of the dragon alone dwarfed me. I could have walked through its
mouth and had plenty of room to dance,” She said, aware of the worry that was spreading over
Jon’s face. “It is likely that she will grow to be of a similar size, yes.”

Jon inhaled quite sharply as he looked at the sleeping dragon.

“Anyway,” Garret spoke suddenly. “If we are not to return to the Wall, nor Winterfell, then when
are we to go, m’lord?”

Melisandre had almost forgotten that question herself in the wake of the dragon’s outburst, she
turned her attention back to Lord’s champion to await his answer.

The silence lasted for almost a minute before Jon sighed and answered the question. When he
spoke, there was nothing but conviction in his voice.

“Greywater Watch.”

Chapter End Notes

Sibling rivalry takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to dragons, eh?

My idea for shadowflame might not be entirely accurate, but it has the same result as
execration from the Riordan Egyptian book series; the soul is destroyed and thus the
person is erases utterly.
I'm excited to explore more of the mythos I have planned for this story :)

The next chapter will be the second part of Jon's meeting with Aemon!

Many thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter Summary

Part Two of Jon and Aemon meeting.

This is set before the previous Melisandre chapter. Just thought I'd point that out to avoid any confusion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence that followed Jon’s tale was absolute.

He was sitting in the chair by the fireplace, feeling strangely detached from the world.

He told them of the night he had hatched the dragon and that meant he had to tell them of the life he had claimed. He felt as if he would perish under the wide eyes of his uncle Benjen; the man who could remember Jon running around Winterfell when he reached no higher than Benjen’s hip.

He could not imagine what Benjen must be feeling, knowing that his nephew has taken the life of another.

‘He is surely relieved that I am not dead,’ Jon said to himself as the silence went on. ‘That I do not doubt.’

How would Jon feel if he learned that Bran had claimed his first life? Is this how Benjen now feels about Jon?

He did not speak of the time he spent in the grasp of that horrific entity. The rest, however, he told them as plainly as he could.

Now, he could only wait for his uncles to recover from their shock and then answer the questions that they would inevitably ask him.

He looked once more at the dragon egg nestled in the chest at his feet. It was very different to the one Nyx had hatched from.

It was much, much smaller than hers. The shell had a somewhat scaly design but there were no veins that resembled gemstones. The egg appeared to be entirely one shade of red at first glance, but when he tilted his head at a certain angle, he could distinguish two distinct shades of red. The majority of the egg was the colour of blood, but the second shade was a crimson that was almost imperceptible. There were also patches of a dull yellow here and there.

The biggest difference, however, was the temperature of this egg.

Even if it had been in the flames for hours, Nyx’s egg would still be cold to the touch. This one was warm despite having been kept in a chest for possibly decades.

‘This must be a Valyrian dragon egg,’ Jon mused as he took the egg from the chest. ‘Melisandre
did say they were much smaller than the one that carried Nyx. I did not think it would be such a large difference in size.’

His movement must have broken the band of silence.

“So, there is a dragon roaming the wilderness not even half a day’s ride from here?” Aemon asked calmly.

“Yes, as I said I left her with two of my companions and my wolf, Ghost.”

“Jon, if you have come here in the hopes that I have knowledge of how to care for dragons, I am afraid I must disappoint you,” Aemon said with a hint of sadness. “Eggs were placed in the cribs of Targaryen babes to encourage a bond to form, I know this much. I know how they are hatched, but that is of little use to you since you have already done so in a manner I have never heard of.” He paused with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Does this dragon obey you, Jon?”

That was an interesting question and Jon was not entirely sure he knew.

He could reach out to Nyx with his mind, not as easily as he could with Ghost, but he felt the connection. He could keep her quiet when necessary and prevent her from wandering too far but there were times when he felt as if he had no control over her whatsoever. She would continue to attempt to climb trees no matter how much he protested; she would screech in clear frustration as her wings were unable to lift her from the ground.

“I would not say she obeys me without question, but then,” Jon paused to work through his thoughts. “There are times when Ghost ignores my commands and rushes off to do his own will. Perhaps Nyx will be much the same when she has matured some? They are not fully grown, after all.”

Aemon made no reply, he simply laced his fingers and rested his chin on top of his hands, clearly lost in thought.

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon said, turning to address his still silent uncle. “I know it is a lot to take in, especially with all we have learned so recently but,” He could not help but feel nervous as his uncle’s eyes found him. “I had no choice. I did not wish for them to die, truly. I-”

“They would have killed you, Jon.” Benjen said, his voice was firm but hoarse from the long silence. “I would not expect you to rejoice in bloodshed, no man should. They would not have hesitated to slit your throat in your sleep had they caught you unawares.” Benjen leaned forward and clasped a hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Killing should never come easy, especially to someone who now has a dragon, a direwolf and a legendary blade in their possession. If you hadn’t stopped them, then they would have terrorised folk who could have raised no defences against them. I will not trouble you with what Wildlings do to their victims but know that you have probably saved more lives than you’ve taken.”

Jon felt some of the guilt fade away as his uncle finished speaking, but he knew it would never fade entirely. He respected the wisdom in his words and was determined to make them a core part of his being.

It was not as if Jon believed he would never have to end the life of another; he had dreamed of slaying foes in epic battles and saving others from evil men. Those imaginings took place in the mind a boy, the same boy who would play at war with Robb and the others. This regret, guilt and shame were the burdens of a man to carry, the reality of slaying his foes was now known to him –
and it did not leave him eager for more.

“I know you are right, uncle. I will never be glad that they are dead, but I am thankful that they will not be able to hurt anyone else.”

Benjen squeezed his shoulder and leaned back in seat with an audible sigh.

“A dragon,” He said with small, strained laugh. “It was a shock seeing those wolves you lot adopted, and now you have a dragon.”

Jon smiled in response to his Benjen’s words. He still had trouble believing it himself and he spent almost every waking moment in the company of the animals they were discussing.

‘And now there is another that may be joining our strange family,’ He said to himself with a hint of amusement.

He was surprised that he had used that particular word to describe the presence Ghost and Nyx had in his mind, but he immediately knew it was the correct one. He turned the egg over in his hands, the warmth of it pleasant in his grip. He assumed Melisandre would want to attempt to hatch this egg immediately, but Jon was not so sure.

He gently placed the egg back in the chest and closed it. He held out his hand to his uncle and Benjen handed him the sword.

A flutter of excitement coursed through Jon as he looked at the legendary weapon.

He had given many of his sticks and wooden swords the names of famous blades during his plays with Robb. Dark Sister was always the most common one; the blade of the Dragonknight and the weapon wielded by Visenya as the first Targaryen monarchs conquered Westeros.

Now, he was holding the blade in his own hand. Not only was he touching the Valyrian steel sword, but his blood was connected to it as a member of the House it belonged to. It was all he could do to stop himself from squealing in excitement as he examined the strange patterns on the blade.

It was as he started to imagine the look on Robb’s face when he showed him Dark Sister that Jon was brought out of his happy imaginings.

He should not think of how Robb will react to Jon having a Targaryen blade, not until he has seen how Robb reacts to learning Jon is a Targaryen himself. The more time he spent away from Winterfell and his siblings, the less certain he was that they would accept him. The words spoken by that disembodied horror had shook him deeper than he realised. At times, he felt as if it was still with him, just festering in the back of his mind and spirit and nourishing the doubts and fears that plagued Jon.

Aemon broke through the silence once more by clearing his throat.

“The return of dragons to the realm of men is an important issue, this is true. The greatest issue the realm of faces, however, lies Beyond the Wall. You know this, Jon,” Aemon said with a strong voice. “That is why I must ask you of another issue facing the realm, as it relates to the one Beyond the Wall.”

“What is it?” Jon asked, he was feeling nervous and curious to hear Aemon’s thoughts.

Jon had expected them both to scoff when he spoke of the threats Beyond the Wall. He felt silly to
be telling them of such things happening in a place where his uncle had ranged, but they both believed him. Jon was equally relieved and disheartened as this meant two more to confirm that this was not some fevered dream.

“What do you intend to do about your birthright?” Aemon asked the question Jon had been dreading to hear.

He wanted to answer that he had no desire to be king, but he knew that was not entirely true.

A part of him, the part that compelled him to open the letter he always carried with him, envisioned himself on the Iron Throne. He would not be an idle and selfish king like Robert, who seemed to enjoy the benefits of being the ruler and yet carried none of the burdens. He would do his best as Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

Another part of him wanted to refuse to acknowledge that he had any claim to the Iron Throne, which could be true given that the Targaryen dynasty had been overthrown by the Baratheons. This part of him was one of fear. He feared that he would be the kind of ruler his grandfather, The Mad King, had been. It was said that his reign was one of promise in the early years, and that his madness took root much later. Jon feared such a fate might befall him if he were to be King.

“I do not know,” Jon said at last. “I may not have any claim to the throne. The Targaryens were deposed by the Baratheons.”

“You still have a claim, Jon.” Benjen said. “At least, I think you do. I am unsure of the way it works.”

Jon looked at him, Benjen’s words had confused him but he also felt a small rush of hope.

“What do you mean, Benjen?” Aemon asked before Jon could.

“Well,” Benjen cleared his throat before beginning slowly. “Ned told me what happened in the throne room after, you know,” He paused and looked at the two of them with disgust clear on his face. They both knew what had happened in the throne room that day. “He told me just how Robert became King.”

“And how, pray tell, did that come to pass?” Aemon asked once again, his voice a little more subdued, no doubt in response to the indirect reminder of the fate of his kin.

“Apparently Tywin Lannister was on the verge of calling for a Great Council. Jon Arryn prevented this by pointing out that Robert was a blood relative of the Targaryens and thus, he had a distant claim to the Iron Throne and had just defeated the reigning monarch. So, as Ned put it, Robert won the throne by right of conquest, but it was his Targaryen heritage that allowed him to keep it. If even Tywin Lannister would not argue the point, then it must be enough. Though,” Benjen’s voice took on an uncertain note as he continued. “I do not know how this affects Jon’s claim to the crown.”

Jon also had no idea how this affected any claim he may or may not have. He looked to Aemon, the man who had refused to be king, to explain the way it worked and was just about to ask such a question when the Maester began to speak.

“If this is indeed how Robert came to sit the throne, then I would assume our bloodline still has a claim to it - however distant. At least,” Aemon sat up in his chair as he cleared his throat. “As far as I am aware of how lines of succession are organised. He holds the throne by right of conquest, but he secures it with his connection to the previous monarchs. We should assume that as this is not
known to the realm at large then it must surely affect the future of his family’s reign.”

This only confused Jon even more and he assumed Benjen felt the same as he looked at him. They did not have to work their way through Aemon’s words, however, as he continued to speak before they could do so themselves.

“If Jon were to overthrow Robert, then he would be claiming the throne by right of conquest, but he would have the stronger blood claim that Robert himself used to secure it.” Aemon laughed as he clapped his hands together once. “It seems Robert has not ensured the complete annihilation of our family after all, Jon. His very claim to the throne based on blood was enough to appease Tywin Lannister, your own blood claim is much stronger. You need only take the throne from Robert or,” Aemon paused as another thoughtful expression filled his features. “If Robert were to die without issue, then the line of succession could revert back to how it would have been had Robert not killed your father. I am unsure if this is how it would be, but it would explain why his blood claim is not known to the realm at large. However, as I understand it Robert has two sons and a daughter.”

That was true. He was no friend to the crown prince, but he would not see Robert’s children harmed so Jon could secure any claim he had on the throne.

“What does it matter?” Jon asked suddenly. “It does not matter who sits the Iron Throne, not when we know what is coming for us. The dead won’t care who is called king or queen if, or when, they make it past the Wall.”

He did not know where that little outburst came from, but he knew his words were sincere. The entity and its champion, The Night King, would not care in the slightest who was referred to as ‘Your Grace’ by the realm. They would sweep through them as they would all smallfolk and lesser nobles.

“It matters, Jon.” Aemon said solemnly. “The realm may be at peace now under Robert’s reign, but he may not reign for very long. Your uncle has informed me of his habits; pleasure unchecked eventually consumes itself. The realm is at peace, yes, but it is not ready for what is to come.”

“And how will Jon being king serve to prepare the realm?” Benjen asked. “I mean no offence to you, Jon, but no one will believe you. If you fly the dragon over their heads, they’ll accept what they’re seeing but they won’t believe you when you talk of dead men rising and White Walkers.”

“You are right, Benjen. Jon sitting the Iron Throne would not open the minds of everyone in the Seven Kingdoms, but he would be able to unite those people to face the threat when the times comes.” Aemon said firmly. “The truth of what is rising Beyond the Wall will not be denied by the Seven Kingdoms forever. It is a matter of ensuring that they do not learn of this truth as it is about to end their lives. No,” Aemon leaned forward and felt for Jon’s arm, Jon met him halfway and was surprised at the strength of Aemon’s grip. “The Seven Kingdoms are at peace, but they are far from united. In Dorne, Elia Martell’s family sit enraged at the fates of Elia and her children. The Iron Islands may well be waiting for the next opportunity to rebel. The Lannisters are not going to be content with being second to the Baratheons for long. Jon, this peace cannot last.”

Aemon’s words rang true in Jon’s ears. He has never met any of the Martells, but he knew they must be fit to bursting with rage. Jon himself felt the savage desire to avenge the brother and sister he never knew; he could not imagine how strong that urge must be for their maternal family.

Despite being a hostage of the Starks these past nine years, Theon never stopped believing himself to be more than the others around him. Perhaps it was because of the Starks treating him as a ward rather than a hostage, but Jon suspected Aemon’s words were true on this matter as well.
Jon was not sure how the Lannisters were second to the Baratheons, not when the crown prince himself was the child of a Lannister woman. How could they attain anymore power in the realm than this?

“How can I be a king?” Jon finally asked. “I was raised as a bastard; I know nothing of governing. I have no experience with ruling or with leading men. How can I prepare a realm to unite against a threat they do not believe exists?”

He looked at his uncle Benjen for some form of reassurance, but his uncle’s gaze was fixed on the chest before them. He was lost in thought, perhaps thinking the same as Jon. Aemon, on the other hand, was staring at Jon as if his sight had suddenly returned. His expression was neutral, and he remained silent for several moments before answering his thrice great-nephew.

“How can you answer a question if it has never been asked of you, Jon? You could very well say the correct answer, but how would you know it is the correct answer without the question in the first place?” Aemon’s voice was soft as he spoke, but Jon felt a bolt of confusion hit him with every syllable. “What I am trying to say is that you should never assume you cannot do something simply because you have never done it before. It is when we are forced to rise to the task before us that we learn who we truly are. How many dragons did you hatch before the one that is currently nearby?”

“None,” Jon answered.

“How many times have you defended yourself from a foe seeking to end your life?”

“Once, the same night I hatched Nyx.”

“And how many dragons have you concealed from the realm of men before the one currently hiding a few hours away?” Aemon asked.

“None. What does any-“

“You see? You hatched a dragon, despite never imagining you would do so. You survived an attempt on your life, despite never knowing anything of true combat beforehand. Yes, you have had training, but it was not that training that saved you that night. It was your instincts,” Aemon paused to clear his throat before resuming. “You rose to the task you were confronted with and you learned that you could meet it. We can never truly prepare for the unknown, Jon. I examined many bodies in the citadel when I was learning to be a maester, yet the first time I had to treat an injured man I was sore afraid. I rose to the task and found myself quite capable of doing so. Do you understand?”

‘Not in the slightest,’ Jon wanted to answer, but he took some time to ponder his uncle’s words.

It was true that he never imagined he would ever hatch a dragon. Yet he had done just that. He received the same lessons with the sword as Robb, but he knew nothing of true combat until that night they were ambushed. Suddenly Aemon’s words started to make sense in his mind.

‘I have done much of late that I have never been prepared for. Even the lessons I received from Ser Rodrik were taught in the light of day, with rules and safety precautions. Yet there were none that night in the woods and I rose to the task.’ Jon could feel his confidence grow a little as he worked through his thoughts. ‘Since that night I have walked with a dragon and with powers I still do not understand. There is no way I could have been prepared for this, but here I am doing it anyway.’

“I believe I understand, uncle,” Jon replied at last. “A part of me wishes I could just be Ned Stark’s
son, but I know that can never be. I know nothing of Rhaegar, but I am his son. I accept that. Perhaps, in time, I will be proud to call myself such but now is not the time for that.” He paused to reflect on all he had learned and what it could mean for the future. He had to be entirely sure before deciding. “What if there was a way of getting proof to Robert? The realm is already at peace under his rule, would they not follow their King to battle these forces?”

Aemon’s sad smile told Jon that he was expecting such a question, so his rapid answer was not a complete surprise.

“Robert is a warrior, perhaps not so much now but the heart is still there. He would not wait for the realm of men to gather strength; he would rush to the Wall with the largest force he could muster and attempt to shatter the evils that are rising. Perhaps he would be successful, but I think it more likely that he would only strengthen the ranks Beyond the Wall. And then what, Jon? How will the realm be able to recover from losing its King and the majority of its forces, as well as prepare for the next assault?”

Jon did not have an answer to that. He had no military experience, but if the stories he had heard of the Demon of the Trident were even half true, he suspected Aemon had the right of it.

Robert would march all of the Seven Kingdoms Beyond the Wall to face a threat they did not truly understand. Jon knew, without a doubt, that they would fail. The realm would be in chaos and any chance they had of preparing for the arrival of The Night King would be lost.

“So, we must prepare the realm for the coming battles, but we cannot do so plainly?” Jon asked Aemon.

It was Benjen who answered, finally ending his long silence.

“Jon, if you parade proof of whatever it is rising Beyond the Wall to the whole of the Seven Kingdoms, very few would band together and march to meet the threat. The majority would be on the next ship to Essos and would never look back.” His voice was as firm as the gaze he was fixing Jon with. “They must be made aware of the threat at some point, yes, but to do it too soon would only cause chaos. You’re afraid, I know you are. Ned did not raise you the way you were meant to be and there is no changing that. I don’t know anything of politicking but having someone aware of the threat on the Iron Throne can only improve our chances of surviving.”

“He is right, Jon.” Aemon said as Benjen finished. “Your father believed his children would be the ones to lead the realm of men against the coming darkness. You have been shown much by not just the Old Gods, but also the Lord of Light. You have hatched a dragon. I may be a maester, but I am not so arrogant as many of my peers to disregard that all of this has been given to you for a reason. A reason that cannot be understood by common men or learned men. The choice is yours, Jon, but,” Aemon once again leaned forward and his face was serious and unyielding. “The consequences of your choice will affect the entire living world, not just you and those closest to you.”

Jon could not argue with the words both of his uncles had spoken.

He knew that the best chance of surviving The Night King and its master would be if the realm was united, but he could not imagine how he was the one to do it. He had a blood claim to the throne, even if his family were no longer the ruling monarchs, but what difference would that make without an army?

‘It would not be bloodless,’ Jon said to himself. ‘Robert will never surrender the throne and the Lannisters would never respect the choice if he did. How am I to unite the realm if I must declare
war to do so?’

He was about to ask his uncles that same question, but it stopped in his throat as another voice resonated within him.

Not alone. You will find allies. In those loyal to your mother’s name and those loyal to your Valyrian heritage. You will find allies in those with ambition and a desire to do good – for others or themselves. You will find allies in the weak seeking protection and in the strong seeking glory. You are the union of Ice and Fire. Proof that two opposites can coexist without destroying each other.

‘I do not know where to begin,’ Jon said to his Gods. ‘I have no armies, no resources and no experience.’

You will find them, all of them. You must cast aside the lie that you have been forced to live. Soon, you will do so completely. Now, you must put aside your fears and wants and accept your role. It must be you or the world will fall to this darkness, and it will never recover. Choose.

“Jon?” Benjen’s voice reached him as the presence of the Old Gods left him.

He was looking at Jon with obvious concern. Aemon was also once more leaning forward with a curious expression on his face.

Jon cleared his throat before speaking the words that would forever change his life. Again.

“I will do it. I will reclaim the throne if I can, by conquest if needs be. I will prepare this world for what is to come.”

Benjen nodded slowly and Aemon smiled before speaking.

“And where will you begin, Jon?”

Jon knew the answer, recalling the images he had seen in the flames when he first laid eyes on Nyx’s egg.

“I need proof of my birth and proof of my legitimacy.” Jon answered solemnly. Despite the fear he still felt as he spoke these words, he could not help but revel in the feeling of them being right. “I must go and meet with Howland Reed.”

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't too sure of this chapter as I read it back, I felt like much of the dialogue could have been explored in a flashback of Jon's future POVs but here we are.

I am unsure just how Jon factors into the line of succession. He will have to take the throne by right of conquest (his dynasty was deposed after all) and if Robert's droplets of Targaryen blood secured him the throne, then surely Jon's fountains of the dragon blood should make for a strong claim. Thoughts?

Thanks for reading!
Winterfell has been Cat’s home for almost two decades, yet the chill that was always present in the northernmost kingdom was not something she ever truly acclimated to.

She was sitting before the hearth in her chambers, lost in thought as she toyed with the letter in her lap. Her gaze would occasionally flit to the chair opposite her where her husband would often sit, and the pang of sadness would hit her with renewed force.

She missed Ned terribly and she knew her children also felt the same way.

Robb was doing his best as the Lord of Winterfell and she was incredibly proud of the man he was becoming.

Sansa, having finally forgiven Ned for refusing to wed her to the crown prince, was hard at work sewing yet another article of clothing for her father.

Arya, her wild daughter, was devoting every moment she could to her swordplay, but Cat would still see her staring longingly south at times.

Bran was growing more and more distant by the day, Cat feared it was a complication from the fever that struck him so suddenly, but Maester Luwin had assured her the worst was past.

Rickon, her youngest child, was the least affected by his father’s absence but that was because he was never alone; he was either with his mother or his black wolf.

She cherished every letter she received from Ned since his departure, though with each one she read the need to have him home only grew.

Aiding Robb in fulfilling his duties as the Lord of Winterfell provided her with a much-needed distraction, but now that he was able to manage things on his own a lot better she was not needed as much as she had been. The increased amount of free time was not something she enjoyed, as it only allowed her mind to focus on her fears of never seeing her husband again.

Thankfully, she had received a distraction today. One that was brought to her on the wings of a raven.

The raven brought her a letter from her lord husband and whilst it was not filled with words of comfort, it was one of hope, nonetheless.

She could probably recall the contents of the letter without having to read it, but she unfolded it to once more gaze upon the words written by her husband’s hand.

Cat,
I miss you, our family and home more and more with each day that passes.

I wish I could write words of love to you in this letter, but I am afraid they must be of duty.

I am confident that Robb is performing his duties admirably, but it is long past time that he fulfils one that is crucial to a future Lord Paramount - that of marriage. I must insist that his bride be of the North; it would not do for two consecutive Lords of Winterfell to take a southern bride.

I regret not one day of our marriage and it is my hope that Robb will grow to love his bride as I have grown to love you.

I know that Robb will do his duty.

Now, on the subject of marriage, I believe I have found a most suitable husband for Sansa.

Lord Willas of House Tyrell, the future Warden of the South. I have come to know him personally and can attest that he is a good man, kind and honourable.

I believe Sansa would thrive in Highgarden - as much as any Stark could in the South, that is.

A wound sustained during a tourney has hampered the use of his leg, it is true, but he remains a good man and I believe he will make a good husband for our eldest daughter.

If you and Sansa are agreeable to such a union, then I will send Lord Willas to Winterfell to meet with the two of you.

I long for the day I can see you and our children again.

Love,

Ned.

She had yet to inform her eldest son and daughter of their father’s wishes.

She knew that Robb would follow his father’s instructions and begin to search for a northern bride, but Cat was not sure how she felt about that. She was aware that the Lord of Winterfell usually married one of his bannermen’s daughters, that her betrothal to Brandon was not a common occurrence but she hoped that her marriage to Ned might have opened the minds of the northern lords to a new tradition. If Ned was to be believed, then she was wrong to hope for that.

She would speak with Robb and ensure that he does his duty for his family, she had no doubt that he would, and he would have his pick of any unmarried daughters of the North.

Sansa, on the other hand, Cat was not certain how she would react.

She feared that Ned would betroth her to one of his bannermen’s sons and although she knew they would treat her honourably, she wanted more for her daughter. The future Warden of the South and heir to the second wealthiest family in the Seven Kingdoms was the best match she could make,
besides a royal betrothal but Ned had already refused that.

She wanted to believe that Sansa would not care for this injury that Lord Willas has sustained, but she could not be certain. Her daughter was far from cruel and would speak with everyone as an equal and with kindness – except her sister – but Cat was aware of her less than realistic outlook on life. She would obey her father, but Ned was ultimately leaving the choice for Cat and Sansa to make.

That was not a common practice, to say the least. As the Head of House Stark, it was Ned’s right to match his children with whomever he wished, but here he was giving that right to his wife and their daughter. It made her love him even more, but she knew what benefits such a match could have for House Stark.

She would speak with Sansa first, to ensure she understands the good that her betrothal might do for House Stark. She would need to speak with Robb before he departs for White Harbour, however, as he could very well secure a match with House Manderly. They were the wealthiest House in the North, after all.

As she folded her husband’s latest letter and returned her gaze to the flames that were warming her bones, she thought of the day she and Ned married. It was not the wedding she thought she would be having, swearing her marriage vows to the brother of the man she had been betrothed to with her sister marrying an old man in the same ceremony.

She and Ned had built their love, piece by piece, since that day. Their children only strengthened and deepened that love and whilst Cat would never be glad that Brandon had died, she celebrated knowing that through such horror her own happiness had been born.

‘I suppose that makes me selfish,’ She said to herself guiltily. ‘Love is so rare in political marriages; I have been fortunate.’

As she allowed herself to get lost in the hopes that her own children would find the love that she had with Ned, she could not help but fall into a contented sleep in her chair before the hearth.

‘My bed has offered no comfort since Ned left anyway,’ She said to herself as she drifted off.

She was watching over Rickon whilst he was at play with his wolf. She was growing concerned about said wolf, as it had already attacked two more servants in as many weeks. She hated to imagine how hurt Rickon would be if he were to be parted from his wolf, but her staff could not be expected to work in such conditions.

‘If only Jon had left his wolf behind,’ She thought as she observed the black beast gently nudging her youngest son.

It was not just for the white wolf that she wished Jon would return from the Wall soon; his absence only added to the sadness Arya was feeling about her father being away from home, now her favourite brother was not there either.

The difference the truth makes is nothing short of astounding. While she felt she would never be truly comfortable around the boy, she was no longer offended that Arya was closer to Jon more than she was her trueborn siblings. Her youngest daughter appeared ready to faint with surprise when Cat attempted to comfort her when she had overheard Arya saying she missed Jon.

Arya was not the only who took note of her mother’s new view on her husband’s bastard. Robb said nothing, but she knew he was grateful Cat no longer referred to Jon as ‘The Bastard.’ Sansa
was still shocked that her mother was now considering Jon to be part of the family, and she felt ashamed even more knowing just how negatively she had influenced her eldest daughter.

‘How they will react when the truth is made known to them?’ She asked herself as she watched Rickon and Shaggydog scurry away. ‘If Jon decides to tell them, that is.’

This line of thought led to her fears once more taking centre stage in her mind, but before they could consume her fully, she was interrupted by a guard at her side.

“Lady Stark, apologies for disturbing you. The foreign priestess who left with Jon Snow is at the gates. She is asking to speak with you, my lady.”

“Very well,” She said in a calm voice as she turned to the guard. “Please bring her to my solar, I will speak with her there. Is she alone?”

“Yes, Lady Stark. She brings a cart and horse with her is all.”

Catelyn nodded as the guard went to carry out her orders. It took an effort to not sound surprised at his words, she had not been expecting the priestess to return without Jon.

‘Do not overthink about what this might mean,’ She told herself as she walked to her solar. ‘You will find out soon enough.’

She reached the door to her solar in what seemed no time at all, she nodded to the guard stationed there and entered the room. She had only just removed her cloak and seated herself behind her desk before there was a knock at her door.

“Enter,” She called as she stood to greet her visitor.

“Lady Stark,” The Red Woman greeted in her usual mysterious voice. “Thank you for receiving me.”

“Lady Melisandre,” She replied. “I am surprised you are alone. Is Jon well?”

“Yes, my lady. He sends me in his stead to speak with you,” She said with a small smile as she took the seat Cat offered.

It was then she noticed the wooden chest Melisandre had been carrying under her arm. As she took her seat and placed the chest before her feet Cat could not help but wonder what the contents might be.

“May I ask why he could not come himself?”

“We acquired a new, ah, companion, on our way to the Wall,” Melisandre said slowly. “Jon thought it best to stay with this companion whilst I travel here to request further supplies, Lady Stark.”

‘A new companion?’ She asked herself as she digested the woman's words.

“I assume that you cannot tell me the identity of this new companion?” She suspected as much, but it was hard to tell given the woman's usual cryptic voice.

“You will learn of her soon enough, my lady. Though I cannot tell you outright, I am afraid.”

“I see,” Cat said evenly. “And since you are here asking for supplies, I suppose Jon intends to extend his travels?”
“Yes, Lady Stark. We are to visit with Lord Howland Reed.”

That surprised her and sent her mind into a freefall.

‘If Jon is going to visit with Lord Reed, then it can only be to gather whatever proof he supposedly has,’ Cat thought as she stared at the woman across from her. ‘Does he intend to press his claim? Has his Targaryen kin at the Wall persuaded him to do so?’

She was always afraid of the consequences such an action could have for her family. She may not respect Robert anymore, nor does she see him as a true king, but he is the reigning monarch and these actions would be treasonous.

If he would laugh at the broken bodies of innocent children simply because of who their father was, then she doubted he would hesitate to condemn her family – the friendship between Ned and himself would only add to his fury at the betrayal.

She rose from her seat and crossed to the door of her solar, opening it slightly she instructed the guard to stand at the end of the hall and ensure she is not disturbed. She closed the door once the guard had moved out of her sight and resumed her seat behind the desk.

Lady Melisandre was watching her with an expression that might have been amusement as she attempted to gather her thoughts.

“You are afraid.” The foreign priestess stated.

“I am,” Cat replied, trying not to show how the woman’s assessment unsettled her. “Why is he going to visit with Lord Reed? Does he intend to press his claim?”

Melisandre did not reply immediately. She pursed her lips and took a deep breath, all the while looking at Cat as if determining whether or not she should tell her.

“I know the truth of his birth, as he has no doubt told you.” She said as the woman remained silent. “If he intends to do what I think he does, then I have a right to know. My family would be-“

“He does.” Melisandre said simply. “It must be this way if the living world is to unite against the threat that is to come.”

It was Catelyn’s turn to be silent. The simple confirmation of her fears had struck her dumb. She did not need to say anything, however, as Melisandre continued to speak as if she knew all the questions Cat could not ask.

“Your fears are understandable, Lady Stark. I know that you are not of my faith, but surely you must realise that there are forces guiding Jon that are beyond men.” She spoke with a hint of religious zealotry, but she did not sound like a crazed fanatic. “Our new companion is another sign that Jon is the champion who will stand against the darkness to come. Your lord husband and nephew have both been visited by the Old Gods, and Jon has even communed with mine own.”

This was something she still struggled to comprehend.

She knew that Ned had seen the same fate befall Robb as she had witnessed in her dreams, but he claims to have seen so much more. Jon was also visited by these Old Gods and now this Lord of Light. All these entities apparently working to put Jon on the throne for some divine purpose.

Catelyn was a woman of faith but these were not her gods. If the Seven had any part in this, then perhaps she would not be so afraid. As it stands, she has only the reassurance of her husband and
this strange priestess to assuage her fears – and they were most certainly not enough.

“What-" She started to say before pausing to clear her throat. “What caused Jon to decide this? Surely he is aware of the consequences such a-

“Lady Stark, I know this is difficult,” The Red Woman interrupted as she leaned over the desk to place her hand on Cat’s own. She almost recoiled at her touch; it was much too warm. “He does understand the consequences such a decision could have for your shared family, but he also understands the price the entire world will pay if he does nothing. My lady,” She gave Cat’s hand a brief squeeze before she sat back in her chair. “It is not for me to explain the mysteries of the gods to you. I know only of mine own and even that knowledge is woefully incomplete. It is not our place to assume we know better than those we put our faith in. If Jon cannot unite this world against the forces of The Great Other, then all the families in the world are doomed. Your own will be one of the first to fall, given how close you reside to the Wall.”

Ned had said much the same, though with simple and succinct speech as opposed to the tones of Lady Melisandre. Cat had never encountered a woman like her before and she was loath to admit that her words impacted her, even if she could not understand the reasoning behind them.

“What is it Jon needs?” She asked, attempting to turn the conversation to more comfortable waters.

“We can forage enough food for ourselves, Lady Stark. Jon asks for some extra provisions for our new companion.”

“Who is this new companion?” Cat demanded, her fear causing her to vent some of her frustration. “If I am to feed this person, then surely I have a right to know their name?”

Melisandre fixed her with another amused look, before she reached down and lifted the chest at her feet and placed it on the desk before Cat.

“Open it.”

Her curiosity was stronger than her annoyance at being ordered around in her own home. She tentatively reached to open the chest, noticing the Targaryen sigil that adorned it, and her breath left her as she took note of the contents.

It was the largest egg she had ever seen. The scale-like pattern and the deep red colouring were somewhat beautiful to behold but her shock was preventing her from fully accepting the sight before her.

“Is this truly a-a dra-“

“Yes, my lady. I would ask you not to say that name in these walls. Jon has asked that this be kept a secret for now.” Melisandre said hurriedly. “Jon suggested I bring this to you to help you accept the truth of our new companion. He felt you needed to know, but he does not wish for anyone else to know just yet.”

“How is a dra-” She stopped herself from saying the word with great difficulty. "Why would I need to see this to be able to accept his new companion?” She was beginning to put the pieces together as she talked. "His uncle. From his father's side. He has left the Wall and joined you, that's why you do not wish for-" She stopped as she remembered Melisandre's earlier words. "But you said her, so it can only be-"

"No, my lady. It is not a person from his father's family." She looked at Cat meaningfully. "But it
does have a connection to his father's house and to that." She finished by gesturing at the open chest with a knowing smirk on her face.

'It has a connection to House Targaryen and to this thing,' She repeated the words in her head, attempting to make sense of them. Suddenly, as her eyes rested on the egg in front of her, the pieces slotted together. 'It cannot be!' She was terrified and a part of her was imploring her to be rational. 'They are all gone. They have been for almost two centuries.'

And yet there was an egg of one of the beasts before her very eyes.

"Who-" She demanded of the Red Woman. "What is this new companion I am to provide with food?"

She was pleased to hear the firmness in her tone, but it did little to alleviate the fear inside of her. She was praying silently that the woman would not confirm her suspicions.

Her fear reached a fever pitch as Melisandre stood and walked around the desk to place a hand on the egg in the chest. Her knowing smile confirmed Cat's assumptions.

"How?" She whimpered, praying that the woman would reveal a sense of humour and declare it all a jest.

"Those are questions Jon alone can answer, my lady." She said as she moved her hand from the egg to Cat's shoulder. "Jon said you would likely put the pieces together once I have shown you the contents of the chest and requested additional supplies from you."

"I must see him, at once," She said as she scrambled to her feet.

She was ready to push her point and to insist that she be escorted to Jon, ready to declare that as the Lady of Winterfell she had a right to do so.

She was surprised that Melisandre merely smiled and nodded as she closed the chest on the desk.

"Jon also said that would likely be your reaction, my lady." Her tone was amused. "Perhaps you could arrange for those supplies and join me in returning?" She closed the chest and tucked it away under her arm, her red robes hiding it. "Any guards who come with us cannot see our new companion, my lady. I trust you understand that."

"Very well," Cat answered, sounding calmer than she felt. "I will arrange for supplies to be loaded onto your cart." A sudden thought occurred to her. "My son, Robb. Would Jon object to him accompanying me? If he intends to press his claim, he should at least inform the man who might well be his Warden of the North someday. And this way we need not fear any guards discovering Jon and the dra-" She almost choked on the word she nearly spoke. "His new companion."

Melisandre considered the words carefully.

The silence that fell as the priestess lost herself in thought gave Cat enough time to organise her own.

'There is a dragon not far from here, if this woman is telling the truth,' She said to herself. 'How is this possible?'

She did not know how she pieced it together, Melisandre had confirmed her suspicions when she touched the egg, but she was not sure how she knew before that.
A part of her was terrified at the idea of seeing a dragon. She wanted to take back her suggestion that Robb accompany them as she pictured him being engulfed in flames, but she knew that Jon would not allow that to happen.

“What if he cannot control it?” She thought as her fear grew. ‘How can any man, Targaryen or no, control such an unholy beast?’

She felt the urge to dispose of the egg permanently as her eyes fell on the bulge in the Lady Melisandre's robes. She did not want dragons flying overhead, able to lay waste to castles and armies with their breath alone. She knew that she could not do this, but her mind was far from rational right now.

“I believe,” Melisandre said at last, shaking Cat from her thoughts. “That Jon will not object to his brother learning the truth. I must ask, however, how do you think he will react? He believes Jon’s father to be a rapist.”

That was not something Cat could answer honestly. She wanted to believe that Robb would not judge Jon for the supposed sins of his father, which he never committed in the first place, but she could not be sure.

“I will inform him of the truth, at least part of it, before we ride to Jon.” She said firmly. “I will allow Jon to tell him the rest.”

“Very well,” Melisandre said as she made for the door. “I will wait for you both by the cart I came with. Be sure that you are not overheard when you inform your son - Jon is adamant no one else know until the time is right.” With that she departed from Cat's solar.

She fell back into her chair and placed her head in her hands. She was trembling with fear as she thought of these new developments and what they could mean for her family.

‘Seven help me,’ She prayed as she attempted to gain control of herself. ‘I pray that this does not bring my family to ruin. A dragon in the world once more and so close to my home!’

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure the first question you're going to ask is why did Jon want Cat to know about the dragon egg... It'll become clear in his next POV so bear with me!

I mostly used this chapter to set up the next chapter, which is a new POV character's first chapter. So, it could be considered the first of two parts, I suppose.

I have decided the route I am going to take when it comes to Jon and Catelyn's relationship post revelation and time apart - and I'm happy with my choice and only hope my readers are as well!

Many thanks to those who have read this!
There were times when Robb imagined being the Lord of Winterfell would be exciting. When he learned that one day he would be able to order people around, he had been as excited as a child could be at the prospect. As he grew and learned more about the responsibilities his lord father had to take care of, and the burden of doing so, that childish excitement was replaced by determination. He knew that one day the cup would pass to him, and he vowed to prepare for it as best as he could.

He thought he would have had more time to do so.

He was sitting in the same chair his lord father would sit in as he bounced Robb on his knee; in those memories his father’s face was one of joy but that was not the expression Robb could feel on his own face.

The day was still young, and he was already exhausted; his eyes were heavy as he attempted to read the many messages from his bannermen before him.

They were more or less the same, the only difference was the sigil that sealed each piece of parchment.

Requests for men to aid in building something. Requests for permission to acquire something. A marriage proposal for himself or for one of his siblings. Requests for him to intercede in disputes between rival houses.

He knew it was his duty to ensure all the needs of his people, noble or common, were met and that they were kept safe under his protection. This did nothing to take away just how exhausting his days had become.

He valued the counsel Maester Luwin provided him with, as well as the support his lady mother had offered him. He was starting to come into his own and relied less and less on them, but he knew they would still be there should he have need of them.

‘I need only do this until father returns from the capital,’ He said to himself once more. ‘He will not remain there indefinitely no matter how much his best friend wishes him to.’

Robb had been more than a little disappointed when he met the man he had been named for. He grew up on stories of Robert during the rebellion; how mighty he was with his Warhammer, charging through waves of enemies all in the hopes of rescuing his love. His love who was Robb’s aunt, the aunt he never had the chance to meet because of the Targaryens.

It was because of that family that he had never had the chance to meet his paternal grandfather and uncle. Brandon Stark might well have been his father had things not happened the way that they did.

He would not allow himself to get lost in thoughts of wrongs that had been done whilst he was still in his mother’s belly. He had duties to fulfil and as much as he’d rather do anything else with his time, he was a Stark of Winterfell and a Stark must do their duty.

He had just finished reading a lengthy letter from Lord Manderly, confirming his impending visit to New Castle among other things, when the knock at his door caught his attention.
“Enter,” He called, hoping it would not be Maester Luwin with yet more papers.

“Mother,” He said as he rose from his seat. “What brings you here?”

“Robb,” Catelyn said. “Forgive me for disturbing you during your work. There is something we must discuss, and then we must leave Winterfell for a few hours.”

He had been expecting her to inform him of the latest development in the war between Sansa and Arya. He should be glad that was not the case, as he always struggled to keep a straight face when he heard of their latest antics.

‘Not very lordly of me,’ He said to himself before adopting a serious mindset.

He walked around his desk and drew up a chair for his mother to sit on, when she had taken her seat her moved to resume his own, but his mother’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Robb, have the guard outside your door move to the end of the hall,” She whispered with urgency. “We cannot risk being overheard. Even by our own men.”

“What is-“ He began.

“Please, Robb. I will explain. Only do as I ask.”

He pushed down the confusion that was rising within him as he made his way to the door.

Once had had ensured his guard was out of earshot and that no one would disturb them, he walked to resume his seat and fixed his mother with an expectant look.

“Well, mother?” He prompted. “What is it that you need to tell me?”

“Robb,” She began before pausing to take a deep breath. “What I am about to tell you is going to be hard for you to believe, but I need you to trust that it is the truth and that I cannot tell you it all. Though,” She paused once more to give him a small smile. “You are a clever man so I daresay you’ll put the pieces together.”

He did not feel very clever in that moment as he tried to remember how to speak. His mother’s words filled him with concern, he could not help but notice the anxiety that laced every syllable and the unease that was apparent on her face.

“Very well, mother.” He said at last.

“Robb, before your father left for the capital, he told me the truth about the rebellion. At least, he told me the truth about certain parts of it.”

“What does any of that have-“

“Please, Robb!” Catelyn cut across him. “We do not have much time. I am sorry this will be difficult to accept, but I will say it once more – it is the truth. What I tell you now is the same as what your lord father told me. Can you believe that the words I will speak are true?”

His lord father was the most honourable man he knew, he was proud to call such a man his father. So, if he told his lady mother the story that she was about to tell him then he could not doubt the truth of it.

He nodded to his mother and gestured for her to resume speaking.
'I will hold my tongue until she has finished, whatever words she might speak.' He silently promised himself.

"Your father told me that your aunt Lyanna was not kidnapped by Rhaegar Targaryen. Yes," She said quickly in response to his sharp intake of breath. "I was shocked when he told me, but please listen. She chose to go with him, she loved him, and he loved her." She took a deep breath herself as she continued to speak, Robb was finding it increasingly difficult to keep the promise he had just made to himself. "After Robert won and your father lifted the siege at Storm’s End, he rode to Dorne to find his sister. And find her he did, but she was already dying when he laid eyes on her."

He waited for almost a minute before deciding he could speak. His mother had fallen silent as she hastily wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Mother, I do not doubt what you are saying is true if father says it is. I admit, it is hard to imagine, given all I have heard growing up was that Rhaegar took Lyanna," He said slowly in case his mother interrupted. "I do not, however, understand how this is relevant now. The Targaryens are either dead or across the Narrow Sea. Why does the entire realm not know the truth?"

That thought had only occurred to him as he spoke of the last Targaryens. If his aunt left with Rhaegar willingly, then why did his uncle Brandon ride to King’s Landing and begin the events that led to his and his grandfather’s deaths that sparked the rebellion?

"You know the rumours of how the Targaryen babes were slain?" His mother asked.

He nodded once more, unable to speak for fear of the nausea he felt as he imagined such a horror.

"They are all true. And Robert, he laughed and rejoiced when the bodies of Elia Martell and her children were placed before him.” Disgust was all over his mother’s face as she spoke these words. "Your lord father was there in the throne room when he did so.”

He felt even more ashamed of being named for Robert Baratheon as he heard this. If it were coming from anyone else but his mother, who had heard it from his father, he would have dismissed the speaker with anger. He could not deny the words of his lord father, however.

"Mother, I still do not-"

"Robb, we do not have much time. We must be away soon,” His mother said as her face filled with anguish and indecision. “I will tell you outright, but I need your word that you will not speak of this further. Not until we are safely away. Do I have it?"

Confusion, fear, curiosity and a growing sense of disbelief all but compelled him to give his word to his mother. She took a few steadying breaths before speaking quickly.

"Your father found your aunt dying from complications following childbirth. The child she birthed was trueborn, she and Rhaegar married,” She stopped to hold up a hand as Robb made to interrupt. “You aunt knew she would not live and so she had your father promise to protect her babe.” She finished with a pointed stare at Robb, her lips pursed and eyes pleading.

Robb felt the entire world had been upturned as he went over his mother’s words.

His aunt was married the Dragon Prince, but he was already wed to Elia Martell. She died birthing a child, his cousin, but he had never heard father speak of him or her.

If they were truly married, then why did his father not contest Robert's claim to the Iron Throne? The very throne that his namesake was seated on, the man who laughed when he saw the bodies of
his cousin’s siblings.

'Because father knew Robert would or the Lannisters would ensure they met with the same fate as Rhaegar’s elder children,' Robb realised, disgust filling every inch of him. 'How could father support such a man?'

This was all too much, he wanted to ask more of his mother, but he had given his word not to until they were away.

“Where is it we must go?” He asked after ensuring he would not lose control. “And why?”

“We must go with the Lady Melisandre to meet with Jon. Please,” She said a little louder as he opened his mouth. “Do not ask me anymore right now. All your questions will be answered soon enough. Do you understand?”

He did not understand, not really. He did not want to push his mother any further though, so he merely nodded once more as he rose from his seat and put away his correspondence that now seemed insignificant.

“Let us go, then.” He said firmly. “Are you ready to depart now? Where is the Lady Melisandre?”

His mother stood as she replied, her body stiff with clear anxiety.

“I am. She is waiting for us by her cart, the men should have loaded the supplies by now.”

Again, he could only nod. He did not want to ask anymore questions for fear of voicing of all the ones that were now running through his mind.

His thoughts was on his secret cousin, trying to picture them despite not knowing if they were a boy or girl. He knew from the stories and illustrations in the books he had read that they had silver hair and purple eyes among other strange features. It made sense that father could not risk them knowing of their cousin if they stood out from everyone else - they would not have known to hold their tongue around guests when they were children.

He and his mother exited his solar and made their way to the courtyard. He prayed that Jon was well, he was relieved he declared he would only be visiting the Wall and not swearing the oath as their uncle Benjen had. He fully intended to name Jon his master-at-arms when the time came.

They caught sight of the strange woman in red, already mounted on the horse that would pull her cart.

Grey Wind came trotting over to him, his ever loyal wolf. As he bent down to pat him on the head, he heard the Lady Melisandre speak to him.

"My lord, as difficult as it may be, you should leave your wolf here." He could not help but feel unsettled by her voice. He looked up at her to argue but she quickly spoke over him. "It will be for his safety, my lord. You will see."

He knew there was little point arguing with the enigmatic woman, so he sent Grey Wind off and called for horses for himself and his mother.

He and his mother mounted their own horses, he assumed they would not be taking guards given how his mother had acted, but it was only now he began to feel that was an unwise decision.

'Too late to arrange it now, it seems.' Robb said to himself as the Lady Melisandre started to move
towards the gate.

He squeezed his arm to his side to feel the reassuring pressure of his sword at his hip, hoping that he would not have any need for it wherever they were going.

They had been riding for around an hour in silence before he had to speak.

He did not know what was going on, he had no idea what to expect and here he was without any guards, riding with two women he would have to protect if the need arose and he had no idea why he was in this situation.

He would feel a little better if he had Grey Wind with him, but the Lady Melisandre had insisted he leave him behind for his own safety.

Granted, Grey Wind was still developing, but he was already of a size to present a threat to a man grown. Of all the direwolves, it was only Rickon’s Shaggydog and Jon’s Ghost that surpassed Grey Wind in size.

“How much farther, my lady?” He said to the foreign priestess who was handling the reins of the horse pulling their loaded cart. He did not understand why she needed such supplies if she was accompanied by competent hunters.

“Perhaps another hour or so, Lord Stark,” Melisandre replied in that same strange voice. “You will have your answers soon enough, use this time to ready yourself for them.”

Her reply did little to improve his mood, but he held his tongue. He would not forget how to conduct himself as a Stark – no matter how infuriating the woman was.

“Are you well, mother?” He asked, looking to his left where she was riding beside him.

“I am, Robb.” She sounded calm, at least. “Are you?”

“I will be when we reach Jon, wherever he is.” He was aware that he sounded as if he was whining but he felt a little justified doing so.

The rest of the ride passed in silence, with only the sounds of their horses and the trundling cart to fill their ears.

After almost two hours, Lady Melisandre steered the cart in the direction of the woods. He looked at his mother in confusion to see the same expression on her face. She merely shrugged and made to follow the woman.

He could see that they were heading towards a wider opening in the trees, so it seemed Melisandre knew where she was going. The cart just barely fit between the trees and eventually it came to a point where it would fit no longer.

“We must continue on foot,” She said as she stepped down from the cart. “It is not much farther, and it seems we have a guide.”

He quickly glanced around as he moved his horse closer to his mother’s, looking for men coming to ambush them. He relaxed when he noticed the distinct white fur coming out of a nearby bush.

He had not seen Ghost in just over two moons now, he was shocked to see just how large the white direwolf had become. He reached well past Robb’s hip, yet he still retained traces of that gangly
awkwardness that indicated he was not yet fully grown.

“Hey boy,” He said as he brushed his pristine coat. “You’ll be the size of a horse before long. What is Jon feeding you?”

The wolf gave no reply, it was quite eerie how silent he was compared to the others, he merely looked at Robb with those unsettling red eyes before moving over to his mother.

“Yes, hello,” She said nervously, patting his head just once before looking determinedly ahead.

Robb could not help but chuckle at his mother’s reaction to the direwolf, she still felt uneasy around them despite knowing how closely they had bonded with her children and Jon.

“Then is no need to fear.” Melisandre said.

He looked at her to reply that he knew the wolf meant him no harm, but it became apparent she spoke to the wolf. Her own red eyes were fixed on Ghost's own.

“Come,” She said as she turned and ventured deeper into the woods, Ghost quickly darting ahead to lead them.

He offered his arm to his mother to ensure her footing would remain steady in the dense wood and made to follow the Lady Melisandre.

“Why didn’t Jon come and greet us, mother?” He asked despite thinking she would not know.

“I suspect that will become apparent when we get there, Robb.” She said neutrally.

Robb could feel his anticipation grow as he walked ever deeper into the woods. He did not, however, allow it to prevent him from taking in the subtle beauty of his environment.

This was the land of the Old Gods, where nature was closer to the world of men than almost anywhere else in the Seven Kingdoms. He had been raised under the Seven and the Old Gods, but here in this place he could not help but feel more for the nameless spirits of nature than the Seven of the South.

He took a deep breath and smiled as he exhaled, revelling in the freshness of the air.

They walked for perhaps twenty minutes before Ghost suddenly stopped and turned to face them. Melisandre stopped as well and repeated the motion.

“It is best you wait here, for now,” She said. “I will return to fetch you.”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and carried on, she disappeared as she walked down what must be a small hill in the distance.

“What is this?” He asked his mother. “How do we know she has not led us into a trap?”

His mother did not look very concerned, but her gaze was fixed ahead at the spot where Melisandre’s red hood had vanished.

“Jon’s wolf is still here,” She said calmly. “I do not think it would allow us to come to harm.”

That much was true, but he could not help but feel uneasy as he looked around his surroundings. Those same trees he had thought of as beautiful could very well hide men who wished to harm his mother and himself. He tightened his grip on his mother and placed his other hand on the hilt of his
sword.

Ghost padded silently over to them after a few minutes. He nuzzled the hand that was on his sword as if to reassure Robb. It worked, somewhat, but he still could not relax entirely.

“There,” His mother’s voice caused him to lift his gaze from Ghost to the spot where she was pointing.

Melisandre walked a few paces forward as she reached the top of the small hill and gestured for them to walk towards her.

Ghost shot off without a backwards glance, but Robb walked a little more slowly. He still could not shake the uneasy feeling, but he knew Jon would not allow him or his mother to come to any harm.

They reached Melisandre who held up a hand to stop them. Her face was serious, and her red eyes seemed to be blazing as she looked at Robb and then his mother. He could feel his mother trembling at his side, and he felt a chill go through him as Melisandre pointed at his sword.

“You should remove that, my lord.” She said firmly. “Instinct is not something easily ignored.”

“Why should-“ He began to demand, but his mother cut him off.

“Do it, Robb. Please, trust me.”

He looked at his mother for several seconds before removing his sword belt and offering it to Melisandre. She wordlessly accepted it and looked at them hard before speaking.

“Prepare yourselves.”

She turned once more and made her way back to the top of what he now saw was some kind of natural pit.

Robb could hear the sound of a stream nearby. He took note of the two men who were stood near the remnants of a campfire, they did not look threatening, but he supposed most experienced bandits knew how to put their targets at ease.

He could not see Jon or Ghost anywhere, but Melisandre continued to walk towards the copse of trees just past the campfire, in the centre of the small field they were now in. He glanced at his mother as they neared them, he was about to stop anyway as he realised pale she was, but then he heard a sound that froze him in place before he could consciously halt himself.

It was like nothing he ever heard before.

It was a screech that ripped through him, he would not be surprised if his ears were bleeding. It sounded both deep and high, multiple pitches ringing out simultaneously in an unsettling way.

He felt something wet touch the hand that was not holding his mother and yelped as he looked down.

It was just Ghost; he was staring up at Robb with those red eyes. He nudged him twice before padding forwards and disappearing behind the copse of trees.

He looked at his mother who was still pale and trembling and raised an eyebrow. She nodded and so Robb moved cautiously forward, angling his body as they move past the trees that blocked their
view so that he was in front of his mother.

He caught sight of Jon, at last, but he could not take in his appearance other than the fact that he had his hand on something Robb had only dreamed about.

Its head was already well past Jon’s hips, it was as black as a moonless night sky but lines of purple and white pulsed along its body. Its eyes were a deep purple and the black slits were fixed on Robb and his mother.

It moved forward out of Jon’s hand, but its tail wrapped around him, so it was still perhaps twenty feet away.

It slowly raised itself to its full height, opening its mouth and spreading its wings.

He could feel himself trembling so violently, he was no longer aware of his mother’s own shaking body. All he could think of was how powerless he felt as the dragon screeched in its hostile posture, as if it would leap at them at any moment.

His vision was shaking as the screech continued, it settled only as the beast at last ended its bellowing, but it did not relax its posture.

Jon stepped forward then and placed his hand once more on the dragon’s head; immediately it relaxed and turned its long neck to look up at him.

Jon chuckled a little and jerked his head in the direction of Ghost who was stood behind him.

He gasped and so did his mother as the dragon uncoiled its tail from Jon and turned to walk over to where Jon had indicated – but not before looking once more at Robb and his mother with those unsettling eyes.

“Robb, Lady Stark,” Jon said as he came closer. “We need to talk, it seems.”

Robb could only stare at his brother, the boy he had known his entire life. His bastard brother who somehow commanded a dragon.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

“You-“ He began but his voice would not work properly. “You’re not father’s bastard. You-“

“No, Robb. I am not.” Jon said with a sigh. “Come,” He moved past them and patted Robb on the shoulder. “Let us sit by the fire and talk.”
The fire was welcome as the night air became even colder than usual, yet Robb still trembled slightly despite the heat.

It was not the cold that was causing his body to shudder, he may look like a Tully of the South, but Robb is a Stark of the North. No, it was the situation he found himself in that was responsible for his trembling body.

His mother looked no better, he was surprised he could not feel the vibrations through the log they were sitting on, so much was she shaking. It must be worse for her as not only had she seen the same thing as Robb, but she had none of the North in her veins to keep the chill at bay.

“Here,” The man, Maro, said gruffly as he handed Robb a cup of ale. “It’s easier to hear it all with ale in the belly, lad.”

“T-thank you,” Robb stuttered. He looked across the fire at his brother – cousin – and waited for him to begin his tale.

‘He still looks like Jon,’ Robb thought to himself as he observed the nervous expression on his Stark features. ‘He looks like he did when father summoned us to his study after one of our late-night excursions.’

He could not suppress the snort of laughter that escaped him as the memory played through his mind. He took a sip of the ale Maro had given him as the others looked at him in response to the sound he made.

“What is it?” His mother asked, her voice remarkably calm despite the situation they were in.

“I was just thinking,” Robb began to answer her as he looked across the fire. “Jon looks about as nervous as he did before father scolded us for raiding the kitchens at night.” He allowed himself another small chuckle as more memories surged through his mind.

He was pleased to see Jon smile in response to his words, but it also brought Robb’s attention back to their present situation. He allowed his expression to shift into the one he wore when dealing with petitioners or disputing lords. He would need to be serious in this matter, jesting can come after.

“Jon,” He said to the man he was raised with. “Mother has already told me of your birth and your legitimacy. She has told me that Rhaegar never kidnapped Lyanna, that she went willingly and—”

“She did, Robb,” Jon said quickly, speaking over Robb before he could finish. “She chose to go with him and he never—”

“I believe you, Jon,” Robb said a little louder than his cousin. “Father would not raise the product of his sister’s rape, he would not have seen you harmed or wanting for anything, but he would not have kept you so close if you only reminded him of his sister’s suffering.”

He saw the look of relief and gratitude dawn on Jon’s face as he finished speaking. It occurred to Robb that Jon likely assumed no one would believe that Rhaegar and Lyanna were lovers, not victim and abductor.

‘I doubt the rest of the northern lords will be as easily convinced,’ He thought to himself. ‘I thought I knew how stubborn northerners could be, until it was my duty to intercede between
them.’

Jon drank from his own cup before looking at Robb and his mother with a thoughtful expression. After a few moments he turned to address the Red Woman, who was off to the side with the other two men.

“Lady Melisandre, would you and the others give my family and I some time alone? There is much we must discuss.”

They all rose from their own makeshift bench and the two men walked off into the night, but Melisandre lingered to speak with Jon.

“My lord, be careful with how you proceed. Darkness has no greater ally than a man’s belief that they know the limits of the world. I await your call, should you have need of me.” She bowed to Jon and left in the opposite direction of the two men.

He was a little taken aback by the woman’s words and the way she bowed to Jon.

“Jon, what did she—”

“There is much that I must tell you and you will want to believe none of it, Robb.” He said firmly over Robb. “Let us get the discussion of my true identity out of the way and then we will talk of the less believable parts of my story.”

“What could be less believable than you being a secret Targaryen?” He asked with a little more force than intended, he regretted it when he saw Jon flinch in response to his words. “Jon, I did not mean—”

“I am still not quite used to it myself, Robb,” Jon said over him once more. “We both grew up hearing of the wickedness of the Targaryens. That they were murderers and rapists and all the rest. I did not wish to believe it but, well,” He gestured at the space between Robb and his mother and they both turned their heads to look.

They both let out a strangled scream as they took note of the dragon barely five feet away from them. It looked large enough when he first laid eyes on it and now it appeared to be huge. It was already of a level with Robb as he was sitting on the log with his mother.

The pulsating veins along its body were more prominent in the dark, in fact, were it not for them he doubted he would see the creature at all; its pitch-black hide almost blended in with the darkness.

“Jon—” His mother gasped, unable to take her eyes of the beast. “P-please—”

“Nyx,” Jon said, the swish of fabric making it clear he was on his feet. “Here, girl.”

The dragon regarded them for a few more seconds, before making a strange trilling sound and padding around the fire to Jon.

He glanced at his mother who looked as though she wished to flee from the situation, he suspected she would have done but she also looked as if she was about to faint from the shock. He saw her eyes bulge even more as she followed the movements of the dragon and so Robb returned his own gaze to the beast.

“What the fuck am I seeing?’ It was all he could think as he took note of the scene before him.

The dragon, whose body was already longer than Jon’s from head to tail, was acting like a kitten as
it wound itself around his cousin. It was even purring! At least, that’s what it sounded like.

“There’s no need to scare our guests, girl,” He said softly as he stroked the beast’s head. “They’re family, they mean us no harm.” The dragon chirped in response and continued to bask in Jon’s affections.

“J-Jon,” His mother managed to speak at last. “H-how did this happen? It cannot be—”

“No?” Jon finished for his mother. “Your eyes do not deceive you, Lady Stark. I thought I was still unconscious when I first laid eyes on her. As for how, well, it is part of the story.” He turned his gaze back to the dragon as it angled its neck upwards, its head was of a height with Jon’s chest. It made a few more of those chirping noises and tilted its head to the side. “Go on but remember what I said.” He spoke in a firm tone.

He stepped back and the dragon unfurled itself from Jon, before it padded away from him and spread its wings.

“Gods—” He breathed out as his mother gasped. His fear was washed away with awe at what he was about to witness.

The dragon tensed and held itself low to the ground, flapping its wings a few times before it jumped from the ground and gave its wings the mightiest beat yet.

He and his mother shot to their feet as they stared at the rising dragon. It looked awkward and dropped a few feet every so often, as if it were not used to flying, but it was no less majestic. It screeched as it rose higher than the trees, now it made sense why they were camped in a clearing.

It did not rise much higher than the treetops but before long, it was only visible because of the strange pulsating glow of its veins.

“Nyx!” Jon shouted.

A screech answered Jon and the purple and white glow Robb had been using to track the dragon was gone.

His eyes were still firmly fixed on the skies above him, searching for the dragon that he knew was there. He could not see a trace of it, but he would hear the beat its wings every now and then.

“You can go as well,” Jon’s voice brought their attention back to the ground. They looked at him and were greeted with yet another mystical beast preening under Jon’s affection. “Be back before we retire for the night, hmm?”

Ghost nuzzled into Jon before licking his hand a few times and he padded over to Robb and Cat. His red eyes were fixed on them expectantly and Robb knew what he wanted; he had seen it often enough in Grey Wind’s own eyes.

“Happy hunting, boy,” He said as he patted the snowy white head. “Try not to scare anyone, eh?”

Robb got a lick on his hand before Ghost turned its head to his mother.

He would not have been surprised if she fainted here and now, her face was full of fear, but she reached out a trembling hand patted Ghost twice on the head before lowering it to her side.

Satisfied, Ghost looked once more at Jon before darting deeper into the woods, his white fur standing out against the moonlit wilderness.
“Well,” Jon’s voice broke them out of their daze once more. “Shall we begin?”

If he had not seen the dragon before Jon told them his story, he would have been deeply concerned for his brother’s sanity.

As it was, he saw the dragon with his own eyes, both on the ground and in the air, so he could not dismiss anything Jon said simply because his words defied all he knew to be true.

‘Speaking with the Gods, white fires and hatching a dragon, the Others and The Night King,’ He repeated the points of Jon’s story to himself, attempting to gather his thoughts. ‘It is not easy to believe, but there is a dragon circling over my head, and I have my own direwolf.’

The silence that fell when Jon ended his story continued to stretch on, as Robb and his mother tried to absorb all they had been told.

His mother had known the truth of Jon for many moons now, whereas Robb has known for only a few hours. Now, he was supposed to accept that his brother was his cousin, that he was to claim the Iron Throne and unite the realm against a force so powerful the Gods themselves decided to intercede.

‘This sounds like one of the tales we used to love as children,’ Robb thought to himself as he tried to picture it in his mind. ‘I never thought I’d be living in one.’

It was his mother who finally ended the silence.

“Jon, have you thought this through?” Her voice was barely more than a whisper. “What it could mean for our family? For my children?”

Robb could not believe that was the first thing his mother asked after everything they had heard.

“I have given it a great deal of thought, Lady Stark.” Jon answered before Robb could speak. “I cannot understand your fears completely, for I am not a parent, but they are my family as well. I would not risk their safety for anything less than this. I will do my best to protect them, I swear.” Jon’s voice trailed off as he looked to the skies, but he quickly gathered himself. “If there was another way, Lady Stark, then I would choose it.”

“Surely, if you convince Robert to accept the truth of this threat, he will—”

“He will march the largest army he could field Beyond the Wall, yes,” Jon spoke over his mother. “He would take them into a climate much harsher than even this one. He would march them through miles of deep snows, with wildlings who know that land better than even the Night’s Watch.” Jon stood and walked over to their side of the fire and knelt at his mother’s side. “Many would succumb to the elements, to wildling attacks should they find an opening, or to disease – Robert’s army would not meet the threat until all of the remaining men are fatigued and crazed. They would be met with a force they cannot comprehend, Lady Stark. Robert would attempt to solve it with his hammer and some steel, but if all that was needed to stop this threat was steel and an arm to swing it – why are the Gods going to such lengths to ensure the realm is ready this side of the Wall?”

His mother had no reply to that, but he could see the tears falling from her eyes and knew that Jon had not assuaged her fears at all.

He could understand why she would be worried for her children; he was also afraid of how this might affect them. If Jon was speaking the truth, however, then their family might fall either way.
They would press Jon’s claim to the throne and lose the ensuing war, or they would attempt to prepare for whatever is coming from Beyond the Wall and fail in that war.

‘Either way, we lose and House Stark falls.’ Robb said to himself as his mind began to race in ways it never had before. He found himself speaking before he was aware of consciously choosing to.

“Uniting the Seven Kingdoms gives us not only the advantage of a larger army,” He said, his throat parched from his long silence. “If it’s headed by someone who understands the threat, then it would give us an advantage in terms of the field. Jon is right, mother,” He turned to address the weeping woman who birthed him. “All we have heard of Robert makes it clear he acts first and thinks second, if at all,” He turned back to Jon. “Facing them Beyond the Wall is a disadvantage that no amount of numbers would balance out. If we make a stand, it must be on this side of the Wall. We could prepare and shape the land to compliment any defensive strategies we can think of.”

Jon looked shocked after hearing Robb’s words, a feeling that Robb shared as he had no idea where they came from.

“Since when do you know about strategy?” Jon asked, his eyebrows almost disappearing.

“You have your gifts and I have mine, Snow,” Robb japed, unable to explain where the knowledge came from.

Jon smiled in response to Robb’s continued use of his bastard surname. Robb was afraid he would take offence to it, since he had a name now, but it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“You don’t—” Jon began before clearing his throat. “You don’t think differently of me then?”

He could tell that this question had been weighing on Jon, perhaps since he first learned the truth himself. He could sympathise but could not truly understand what he was going through; Robb had always known his name and parents, but Jon was denied even that.

“No, it doesn’t.” He said honestly. “We were raised together, and we played and learned together. Many of my earliest memories have you in them and you were my brother then, just as you are my brother now, Jon.” He stood and walked over to stand beside the hidden prince, placing his hand upon Jon’s shoulder before continuing. “No matter what, you’ll always be my brother. Even if you are technically my cousin and may very well be my King, one day. You’ll always be my brother, or sister, you’re pretty enough to pass for one.”

He laughed as Jon made to prod him in the ribs, the tension of the moment broken for now. Jon opened his arms and Robb did not hesitate to embrace him as he had done many times before.

“How are you to protect my children if you are warring for the Iron Throne, Jon?” His mother’s voice broke through their moment of brotherly bonding.

He looked back to see his mother was also standing, her face showing only fear and pain and the beginning stages of anger.

“Lady Stark, even if I do not fight for the Iron Throne, your children and everyone else’s children will still be at risk.” Jon answered her with a firm but kind voice. “You may not believe me, you may not believe the threat is real until it is before you, but I swear I will do all I can to keep the rest of us safe.”

“Mother,” This time Robb cut her off. “Do you imagine Jon will be able to hide the dragon for
long? How old is it, Jon?"

“She hatched less than a week after I left for the Wall.”

He blanched at that; he was not expecting the dragon to be that young.

“Then how is it so large already?” He looked once more at the sky for a trace of the beast but found none. “Is that normal for dragons? Did your Targaryen relative at the Wall tell you?”

“I do not know, Robb. I know only that her egg was much larger than the one I was given at the Wall,” Jon answered, glancing at the small chest the Lady Melisandre had deposited earlier. “I did not expect her to grow so fast, even after witnessing how quickly the direwolves developed.”

“How large will she be by the time you return from Greywater Watch?” Robb asked, forgetting the original point he was going to make in light of what he had just learned.

“Again, I do not know. Her parent was The Cannibal, according to Lady Melisandre, and from what she told me of its bones – Nyx will be quite large before she is fully grown. Melisandre thinks it is something to do with the magic in the North, but I cannot be certain.”

Robb was silent for several seconds, processing the information before turning back to his mother.

“Not even a year old and already able to fly, mother. How long do you think it’ll be before Robert hears of a dragon in the North?”

“We can send the b-beast away or—”

“We will not be sending her away, Lady Stark.” Jon said hotly before Robb could respond. “You will be thankful for her when the time comes, I assure you. We need all the help we can get for the threat Beyond the Wall.”

“We don’t know whatever it is Beyond the Wall, Jon!” Catelyn all but screamed. “We do know, however, that Robert can send his armies against us and we will be next to defenceless. How can you be sure the Gods truly spoke to you? How can you be certain that this isn’t some form of the madness that—”

“Mother!” Robb roared, unable to believe what she was about to hurl at Jon. “Jon is not mad! If he is then father must be as well! I have received no visions from the Gods or dreams of the future, but if Jon and father say the threat is real, then the threat is real.”

His mother looked as though she was trying to formulate further protests, but all she could do was stare helplessly between her son and nephew.

“Robb, Jon,” She said at last. “There must another way to face this—” She clenched her fists repeatedly as she searched for the right words. “Whatever it is that is coming from Beyond the Wall, without you taking the Iron Throne. What use is magic against thousands wielding steel and —” She broke off with another scream, and Robb also yelled in shock as he turned to Jon.

His brother, the boy he grew up with and learned to wield a sword with, was stood before them with his right arm extended – and his hand was on fire.

It was burning with pure white flames; Robb was not as close to Jon, but he could not feel the heat he should be feeling from the fire. The flames did not even seem to be damaging Jon’s skin or clothing, it simply burned.
“I first used this in a place I can only describe as the Void.” His voice was calm, as if his hand was not currently on fire. “It saved me from The Night King, twice. When Nyx hatched, these flames cracked her egg and since that night I have felt different. More whole, but not completely so.”

He lowered his arm to his side and the flames died. He looked at his mother long and hard before speaking once more.

“Whatsoever it is I can do, whatever forces I can call to my side, I will use them to protect our family and save the families of the world,” He spoke with absolute conviction. “I cannot say that I know what will happen when I press my claim for the throne, but if I do nothing then all of this,” He gestured at their surroundings. “Will be covered in darkness and death.”

Robb was still reeling from what he had just witnessed. He could only stare at the hand that was now hanging loosely at Jon’s side, looking completely undamaged from the flames that had just engulfed it.

He glanced at his mother to see that her own face was alight with fear, he knew she would not be the one to speak so it must be Robb that asked the question.

“How did—” He could barely form the words. “How is that—”

“I do not understand how I do it, exactly,” Jon answered, turning his attention to Robb. “I was only able to do it in the Void before Nyx hatched, that was when I first brought the flames into this realm. Ever since I can call on them if I concentrate enough, but it is taxing.”

Jon looked at Robb steadily before turning his gaze to Catelyn.

“Lady Stark, I know that there are no words I can offer that will stop you from fearing for your children,” He sounded calm as he addressed the trembling woman. “I will ensure they are kept in the North until the rest of the realm is secure. They have their direwolves and men loyal to their family to protect them, and the North is no easy conquest for a southern army.” He took a few tentative steps towards Robb’s mother, when she didn’t step back, he closed the distance between them. “This could all lead to the ruin of House Stark, I know, but it will be ruin brought about by the hands of men. If we do nothing, then House Stark will be ruined by the hands of a horror the world has not known for thousands of years. And,” He turned his head to the sky as he continued to speak. “We will have some magical support of our own.”

The dragon had returned, it came out of the black sky so suddenly it was as if it simply materialised from the darkness. It was not until its markings began to glow with that strange purple and white light that Robb could see it properly.

It landed a good ten feet away from where they were, it looked at Robb with those unsettling eyes before turning its gaze to Jon and his mother.

“How did—” Jon said, beckoning to the dragon with his hand. “She will not harm you, Lady Stark.” He said in a calming tone, his mother having attempted to scurry away when she realised what Jon intended.

Slowly, the beast padded over to them. Robb could appreciate just how long it was for such a young creature, he was taller than Jon, but he knew his own body would scarcely be longer than that of the dragon.

The dragon let out a soft chirp as it reached Jon and his mother, he could see the look of abject terror on Catelyn’s face, but he knew Jon would not allow the beast to hurt his mother.
“Here,” Jon said to her as he placed a hand upon the beast’s head whilst leading one of his mother’s own to do the same. “She will not harm you; I swear it.”

His mother gasped as her hand finally touched the dragon’s head. The creature stopped its strange chirps as his mother’s hand caressed it, but it did not look as if it would harm her. Jon’s own hand on the beast reassured him of that.

“I-it’s cold,” His mother managed to say as she lowered her hand from the dragon. “I thought it—”

“Yes, I would have thought as well,” Jon said softly. “I do not know what it might mean, but she is still so young.”

He let go of his mother’s hand and began to walk back to where Robb stood, he wore a reassuring smile and Robb knew what he intended to do.

Robb could not help the fear that rippled through him as his cousin gestured to the dragon once more. He was excited as well, there was no denying that. The excitement was quickly overshadowed by fear as the dragon walked itself over to where Jon and Robb now stood.

“Slowly,” Jon said as he took Robb’s wrist in his own hand and guided it to the dragon’s head.

The eyes were even more unsettling up close, but it was the teeth he glimpsed when the dragon opened its mouth that caused him to almost soil himself. They looked as sharp as any dagger.

“She is cold,” He breathed out as his hand touched the dragon’s head. It was as hard as the stone walls of Winterfell and just as cold. If not for the movement of the dragon, he would have thought he was touching a simple rock. “Why is she so cold?”

“I have no answers for that, Robb, as much as I wish I did,” Jon replied as the dragon walked away and curled up at the side of the fire. “I would have thought a fire breathing dragon would be warm, but nothing.”

“Can she breathe—”

“Again, I do not know. Melisandre assumes it must come much later in their development, but I am uncertain.” Jon was smiling at the beast curled up before them as if it were some adorable pet. “How do you think the northern lords will react to the truth of who I am? Fath—” He broke off before he could complete the word. “Your father believes they will support me, but they have no love for Targaryens and they’re not exactly, well, you know.” He smiled knowingly at Robb.

“I know,” Robb laughed. “The disputes I’ve had to settle in my short time as Lord of Winterfell, it truly was a shock to realise just how stubborn and set in their ways the men of the North are.” He allowed the moment to stretch on a little more before returning to the seriousness of the situation. “I do not know how they will react, but I do not share father’s optimism about it being wholly positive. Even if they accept that Rhaegar did not take Lyanna against her will, his father still burned the Warden of the North and his heir.”

Jon’s expression was troubled as he contemplated these words. Robb could not give him false hope that the North would embrace his true identity with open arms – the best that could be said is that they would not harm him merely for being his father’s son. They would not trust him, but they would not condemn him for the actions of his parents.

“The She-Wolf being his mother might sway a few of the most devout Houses,” He thought as he remembered all he had heard of his wild aunt. ‘That does not mean they will follow her son into a war for a throne all of them resent being sworn to, however.’

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He was just about to say this much to Jon, but his mother finally ended her silence.

“There is little sense in making plans here and now,” She said with forced calm as she walked over to her son and nephew. “You must get the proof of your birth, if you are truly set on this path. Your part,” She turned to Robb. “Is fairly simple. You are due to travel to White Harbour, use the opportunity to gauge the potential reaction the more influential Houses might have to the news. I do not think it wise to declare yourself,” She returned her gaze back to Jon. “Until my husband has returned from the capital. They might listen longer to the words of the man who actually found his sister and her child.”

Robb and Jon remained silent as Catelyn finished speaking. It was quite a sudden turn from her previous behaviour, but she must know enough of Stark men to know that there is little point trying to change their minds once they’ve been made.

“We should think about heading back, Robb,” His mother said suddenly, breaking the silence once more. “I assume you travel mostly at night given the beast—” She broke off as she addressed Jon. “Given the dragon that you have accompanying you? At least, that is what I hope you are doing.” She shot Jon a look that Robb had seen her give Arya countless times. It warmed him to see it.

“Yes, she blends in quite nicely at night, though I do not know how we will manage when there is little cover to be had.” Jon said as he looked around the trees that hid them. “Most of the North is open fields and there will be nowhere to hide Nyx during the day.”

“Perhaps Lady Melisandre will have a solution for that,” Catelyn said before once more turning to Robb. “We must go now before they send out a search party, we told no one why we were leaving, after all.”

“Yes, mother,” He looked at Jon, ready to embrace him in farewell but stopped when he noticed his expression.

“There is something I would ask you to take back, to keep safe,” Jon sounded more excited than he had ever known him to be. “It would not do for me to be discovered with it, should such an event occur.” He hurried off to his belongings and returned with what was clearly a sword.

“You’ll need a blade for the road in case you are attacked again, Jon,” He said as Jon offered him the sheathed sword. “I know you might not wish to—”

“I have a sword for the road, Robb,” Jon cut across him, still smiling excitedly. “This is for when I have finished travelling. Look.” He pushed the sword into Robb’s chest, and he clutched it reflexively.

“I don’t understand, what—” He felt his breath leave him yet again that night as he noticed the hilt of the sword. “No, is that? Truly—” He was stammering like a babe as he unsheathed the sword and saw the Valyrian blade in all its glory. “Dark Sister?” He looked at Jon with a mixture of excitement and awe.

“Yes,” Jon answered, his own enjoyment of the situation making him look like a little boy. “My relative at the Wall gave it to me. You’ll keep it safe for me, won’t you?”

“Only if you promise to let me use it when you can carry it openly,” He quickly responded, his eyes once more on the blade.

“Done.”

They ogled the legendary sword for what might have been hours, feeling the weight of it and
making a few swings with it. They were both acting like children with a new toy and so Robb’s mother interrupting them like two children who had played too long felt right for the situation.

“Enough, sheath that blade and let us be away, Robb,” Her tone was firm, but not unkind. “The guards will not be idle if we remain missing much longer. Jon, do what you must but be careful,” She fixed him with a stern look before it softened just enough to border on concern. “Do not take any unnecessary risks during the day whilst you are travelling. Now, come.” She turned and beckoned to Robb to follow.

“I will see you soon, brother,” He said to Jon as the two embraced. He was glad to see the light-hearted expression was still on his face before he turned to follow his mother.

Ghost appeared out of nowhere to lead them back, but Robb could scarcely notice. Twice he stumbled due to not paying attention to the ground as he looked hungrily at the fabled blade of Visenya.

‘What a night this has been,’ He thought to himself. ‘Legendary monsters, legendary blades, my brother is my cousin and might well be King.’

He would support Jon, even if he would be the only northern lord to do so, he would not turn his back on his blood.

‘We are the Starks of Winterfell. Jon might be a dragon, but he is also a wolf. A Dragonwolf.’ He smiled at the moniker he would tease Jon with when safe to do so as he mounted his horse.
He was standing on the battlements of his home, looking out into the darkness that had swallowed the lands surrounding Winterfell.

He could not see anything at all in that blackness and when he turned around to look for his family safely behind the walls of Winterfell, he found no one there to rest his eyes upon.

He was alone. Utterly alone. He had only the silence of the darkest night and the piercing cold for company.

Yet again he moved away from his vigil atop the battlements, only he found himself standing in the same spot the moment he turned a corner. He could move freely about this stretch of the walls, but he could not leave the site completely.

He did not know why he must remain here, when all of his family were clearly gone from this place, but he knew there must be a reason. A reason that would make all of this pain and isolation worth it.

The familiar but still heart stopping wail filled his ears as he turned his gaze once more to the unnatural darkness. He counted four of his heartbeats before the first wave of ghastly creatures broke through the veil of shadows.

He could smell them even from here, the sickly-sweet smell of death and that other strange, cold scent that leeched what little hope he had left from him.

Just as the army of the dead reached the bottom of Winterfell’s walls, their masters came into view. All of them astride dead horses, snow bears, ice spiders and dead direwolves. It was the sight of these beautiful but terrible creatures sitting atop the animal that represented his ancestors that filled him with horror, more than anything else he was seeing.

Just as the mass of charging corpses formed a pile to scale the walls, the overlord of the army of the dead entered his line of sight.

It was not sitting astride any mount, but neither was it touching the ground. It was surrounded by
what he could only describe as an ice storm that was bringing it ever closer to the spot where Ned stood. He could hear the roaring winds that encircled the creature as it neared him, it did not need to scramble up the hill of corpses it has created – it was flying towards him slowly, certain of victory.

He knew what would happen once The Night King was past the walls of Winterfell. The ancient magic of his home would be corrupted once it passed the barrier none could see, and then the last of its ancient shackles would be loosed. His Gods had told him this much.

He waited as the malignant creature was mere feet away, its icy blue eyes fixed on Ned’s Stark grey. He was unable to look away, even as he recoiled as the beast extended its hand to touch Ned and send him once more into the void.

‘Please, let this be the last time I must see such a thing,’ He begged his Gods as the palm of The Night King almost covered his entire line of sight.

Then, from out of nowhere, a blinding light lit up the night sky. The Night King itself halted, suspended in mid-air by its personal storm, its gaze fixed with wide eyes at something behind Ned.

He turned on the spot to see this new sight for himself. Never before had this happened, not once in all the times he had been subjected to this nightmare.

The blinding light was suspended in mid-air just as The Night King was, but there was no storm surrounding this one. It was in the shape of a man but there were no features for him to discern.

As he stood there transfixed the figure of light raised its left hand and the light formed what must be some kind of spear. He could scarcely follow the figures movements as it launched the light spear at The Night King, who was blasted back as it impacted against the creature and exploded – the army of the dead were showered with the sparks of the blast and crumbled where they stood.

‘What is this?’ Ned pleaded with the Gods he knew were listening. ‘Why has this not happened before?’

Because the King has only just been born. Watch.

Another set of monstrous roars shattered the night and Ned’s eyes instinctively shot to the sky above him. He could not believe what he was seeing.

Three colossal beasts were flying over his home, he had never seen them before, but he knew what they were.

Dragons.

Each beat of their wings gave off blasts of that same light the spear thrower radiated, each beat piercing the darkness and driving it back.

He looked back at the figure of light and as he did, the scene changed with a whirl of distorted light.

He was in the throne room of the Red Keep, a place he had been in during his waking hours that very day. It looked much the same, except instead of Robert sitting the Iron Throne there was only Jon.

He could not help but be filled with a sense of wonder at the sight of his nephew, the boy he loved as his own son, sitting upon the throne his ancestors had forged as if it were made for him.
Jon looked much the same as he always did, except for his eyes.

Instead of the Stark grey he had inherited from his mother, Ned’s beloved sister, they were pure white. Small arcs of white light shot out of his eyes as he observed Ned. It was unsettling, but he knew not to fear the man before him. The King in his rightful place.


‘I will not, I swear.’ He vowed to the formless Gods.

“Uncle.”

Jon has risen from his throne and was walking towards where Ned would be standing, were he physically there. Nothing like this had ever happened before and Ned’s awe only grew as his nephew closed the distance between them.

“We must unite this realm to face the threat Beyond the Wall,” Jon said, he was actually speaking with Ned and he knew it was no vision from his Gods. Somehow, Jon was speaking to him in the realm of the Gods. “The only way to do that in the short amount of time we have is if that,” He pointed at the Iron Throne behind him. “Does not fall to anyone without the blood to seal the pact.”

Ned knew as much; his Gods had shown him just why the Iron Throne needed to be held by one of dragonblood. One of the few good things about Robert sitting the throne was that his connection to the Targaryen bloodline prevented the magic of the throne from fading.

“I will claim it. By right of blood or conquest. For the good of the realm.” Jon said with a voice that was laced with power. “I have the proof of my birth; you will bring allies from the South and together we will unite them. This will not be easy, there will be death but with those deaths, we may preserve life for thousands of years to come.”

‘I do not understand,’ Ned said without voice, hoping that Jon could hear him in this void. ‘I am doing my part, but how are you here?’

"This is the only place I can be. At least until my body is ready to contain the fullness of the power I have been given. I am not the boy you raised, uncle; I am the man he must become if the world is to defeat the forces of The Corrupted One." He turned his back so he was facing the Iron Throne before he continued to speak. "I know that you chafe against the actions you must take in this place, uncle. Dishonour is not a cup a man such as yourself is satisfied to drink from. The Gods have shown you why such actions are necessary, just as they've shown you what will befall our family should you falter."

Ned could not help but feel fear and shock as the being who looked like Jon but was not Jon spoke. He was reminded of all he had seen the first time his Gods spoke to him and it strengthened his resolve.

‘I will not falter. I will reclaim my honour by playing my part in the wars to come.’ Ned vowed. ‘I only hope I have the chance to do so.’

The future Jon merely nodded at Ned’s words as he turned his back on the throne.

“You do not yet know what you must bring to me, but you will in time. It is in hidden in the place where your body sleeps. Without it, I cannot be born into the realm of men.”

‘I do not know what I am searching for, Jon.’ Ned said in desperation. ‘I feel the pull but there is no path to follow, the Gods have not shown me what it is I am to find here.’
That is because the time is not right for the path to be revealed, and the Old Gods have no eyes except your own where you are now.” Jon answered. “When the time is right, you will know. Follow the path when it is there, and your task will be complete. In the meantime, uncle,” Jon turned back to Ned, the white fire in his eyes burning intensely. “Focus on building the alliances we need. You will bring some, the ignorance of the false kings will bring the rest.”

Ned could scarcely understand the words this King had spoken, but he knew that he must follow them.

“I will see you soon, uncle,” The King said as he reached out to touch Ned, as if he were actually there. “You will know what to do when the time is right.”

He felt the reassuring warmth of the King’s hand as if his flesh were with him in the realm of the Gods. The entire throne room was engulfed in those white flames that burned in Jon’s eyes and Eddard Stark’s eyes shot open in the realm of men.

Ned struggled to carry on as normal over the next few days, his mind always turning back to the dream he now knew to be a visit to the realm of the Old Gods.

He was relieved that he was no longer forced to witness the horrors he had seen anymore, having suffered through the same hopeless nightmare ever since he arrived in the capital. He was also afraid of what it might mean that he no longer received such visits.

‘I feel their presence still,’ He reminded himself as he made his way back to his study. ‘They would not abandon me here, at least not until I have done my part.’

He spent the entire meeting that morning thoroughly distracted; the figure that had been Jon – or would be Jon – told him that Ned would know what he needed to find for him when the time was right. Knowing this did not stop his mind from attempting to imagine what he might find when the time came.

He looked forward to an hour or two alone in his study, time he planned to devote to arranging his thoughts and gaining some semblance of control over them once more.

Opening the door to his study, he should not have been surprised to find that such luxuries were not for him to have that day.

He dismissed his guard from his post at his door before he fully entered his study; he did not want whatever he and his guest were to discuss to be known to anyone else.

“Lord Varys,” Ned greeted as he locked his study door and made for the chairs before the empty fire.

“Lord Hand,” The Spider greeted, rising from his own chair and giving a small bow. “Forgive my intrusion. I thought it best not to discuss our business in the council chambers.”

Ned closed his eyes and took a deep, steadying breath before opening them and nodding at the man.

“Very well,” Ned said, he could hear the weariness in his voice as he took the seat opposite the one Varys once more occupied. “Have there been any further developments?”

“Straight to the point as ever, my lord,” The Spider said smoothly, before his voice took on a hint of sympathy. “Yours is a heavy burden, to be sure, but a necessary one. I will be as brief as I can
Yet I expect that will still be longer than I would prefer,’ Ned said to himself as the eunuch gave a small giggle.

He waved his hand at the man, indicating for him to begin his reports.

“I can confirm that the young woman who caught the attention of the late Lord Arryn bears such a striking resemblance to the promising young blacksmith,” Varys said in a low voice, always vigilant of any unseen ears. “One could be forgiven for believing them to be siblings, my lord. The same is true for Robert’s acknowledged bastard, Edric Storm, who currently resides in Storm’s End. All of them have the same look, though only Edric is reported to resemble a young Robert – which is to be expected, given that he is the only one our King has acknowledged.”

Ned knew instantly that the young apprentice smith, Gendry, was Robert’s son. He had many memories of Robert when he was of an age with Gendry and the resemblance was certainly there. Any who knew Robert at such an age would be able to put the pieces together, especially the man who raised him.

“I do not understand why the Lannisters would murder Jon Arryn for learning of Robert’s bastards,” Ned said quietly. “My lady wife’s sister, Jon’s widow, implicated them in her letter.”

“You have read the book that your predecessor expressed an interest in, yes?” Varys asked.

“Yes, but I still do not see why you suggested—”

Lord Hand, forgive me for interrupting you,” Varys said with a small smile. “But did you read the entire entry on House Baratheon?”

“Just as you suggested, yes,” Ned answered the eunuch.

“And what, pray tell, did you learn from your tedious reading?”

Ned thought about that, he was used to relying on the presence of his Gods to focus his mind. The calm he usually felt when they were with him was gone, he had almost forgotten just how little his tolerance for wordplay was.

“It is nothing more than a record of the births and deaths of members of their line,” He said to the man before him, trying not to let his irritation obvious. “It records a few details of their life, appearance and any glories that they may have earned but that is all.”

Lord Varys merely looked at him with what might have been pity.

Ned was never comfortable around the man, no matter how much he claimed to serve the realm and want only the best for it. He knew there was something different about him, something dangerous. Not in the sense of combat, but there was danger there.

“Speak plainly, Lord Varys.” Ned said, wishing for nothing more than to be done with this. “What is it I am missing?”

“Very well, Lord Stark,” Varys said with a dramatic sigh. “In all of the entries in the section of House Baratheon, how many were born without being black of hair?”

Ned had scoured the pages the eunuch suggested many times, it was too long to commit completely to memory, but he did not recall any Baratheon being born with anything other than the
Baratheon features, until the three most recent additions to the lineage. He still did not see why this was important.

“Only the princes and princess.” He answered the man. “What does it matter? We’ve both seen Robert’s bastards, they have the same features as he does.”

“Yes, they do, my lord. The same, however, cannot be said for the King’s lawful children now, can it?”

“They favour their mother, it is true. I still do not see why Jon Arryn was—’’

“My lord,” Varys interrupted him once again, his voice no longer soft and high but quite low and gravelly. “I know of eight of Robert’s bastards, they all resemble their father. Regardless of their mother’s features. All except the King’s three children with Cersei Lannister.” He looked at Ned meaningfully, eyes blazing. “Surely you know what I am suggesting?”

Without waiting for an answer, Lord Varys rose from his chair and walked over to Ned’s desk. He lifted the large tome from it and returned to his seat.

“Here, Lord Stark,” His voice was once more as it always was. “Read the last few entries before our princes and princess.”

Ned knew what the man was suggesting, he was not that slow without his Gods, but he dared not believe it.

*Ormund Baratheon… Black of hair…*

Robert’s grandfather, who the singers say died in the arms of his son.

*Steffon Baratheon… Black of hair…*

Robert’s father, who drowned along with his wife in a shipwreck Robert saw with his own eyes.

*Robert Baratheon… Black of hair…*

A man who still had that colouring but was not the same man he called brother all those years in The Eyrie.

*Joffrey Baratheon… golden haired…*

*Golden haired…*

He looked at Lord Varys and was met with one of his usual small smiles.

“This alone does not prove anything,” Ned said. “They favour their mother, as do all but one of mine own children.”

“Yes, but if you recall our King and Queen are not the first of their Houses to unite in marriage,” He gestured at the book in Ned’s lap. “Gowen Baratheon and Tya Lannister had but one child, who was born with black hair. Do recall that the young blacksmith said his own mother also had light hair.”

The boy, Gendry, did say as much but his hair was as black as Robert’s own.

He opened his mouth to ask the eunuch what else he knew, but words failed him as he felt the familiar presence within him once more.
We did say it would not be as easy to act in the manner you needed to. You know this is the truth, yet you refuse to acknowledge it out of some lingering affection for your friend. Do not close your eyes to the truth, Eddard Stark, for not even we will be able to open them again.

‘I thought you had left me,’ He said to his Gods, the familiarity still there. ‘There is not enough proof to bring this to Robert.’

“Lord Stark?” Varys ventured, looking concerned.

Ned could only hold a hand up to the man, unable to speak because his Gods were once more in his head.

*Your desire to bring the truth to Robert is one of the reasons your family would have suffered, had we not intervened. The truth will come out, but not by your own doing. At least, not directly. Speak of this to no one. Remember your oath to us.*

‘Very well,’ It was all he could say, he was disgusted at the thought of hiding such a thing from the man he grew up with. ‘The children, they may not be Robert’s, but they are innocent. I cannot have their blood on my hands.’

*You will not have their blood on your hands, child. The echoes of the past need not reach the present, you must not make the mistakes you would have had we not acted first. You know the true threat that is coming. Remember yourself. Remember us.*

He felt their presence leave him once more, though he did not feel as hollow as he did the first time.

“I cannot bring this news to Robert,” He said to the eunuch who was still looking at him confused. “You know how he will react. I assume you also know who their true father is?”

“I have my suspicions, my lord.” Varys answered, his features once more controlled. “I will not burden you with the knowledge, but I already have a plan for letting the truth be known – without any harm coming to the children.”

“What is this plan?” Ned asked.

“I will say nothing of it yet, but trust that you are not the only one acting on instructions from those higher than monarchs.”

‘How does he know?’ Ned wondered, unsettled by the eunuch’s ability to know things he should not. ‘What god could be guiding him? He is not a native of this land.’

He filed the information away, today was not the day he would be receiving any answers about Varys. He had more important things to work towards.

“Now,” Varys leaned forward and laced his fingers together. “I am sure you know that Lady Olenna is close to finding our hidden dragon? She does not know who he or she is, not yet. She is certain, however, that a child of the Dragon Prince yet lives. I left her with the faintest of scents to follow when I met with her in Highgarden. I admit, I am surprised she has not already figured it out. Might I ask, why did you leave a trail for the Lady Margaery to follow?”

Ned remembered the prompting he felt that day in the city, his Gods have not yet revealed the reason for it, but he knows that they have plans for the Rose of Highgarden.

“I am afraid I cannot say at this time, Lord Varys. You will know when I do,” He said to the eunuch. “At any rate, they departed just yesterday for Highgarden and Winterfell. Robert refused
the betrothal Lord Mace proposed, whereas I have accepted their proposition to wed my daughter to Lord Willas. Lord Mace will be returning son Highgarden whilst Lord Willas, Lady Margaery and Lady Olenna will travel to Winterfell.”

He only received the raven from Cat confirming the betrothal a few days past, but he wasted little time informing the Tyrells. They were not as thrilled as they might have been, since Robert flat out refused to betroth Margaery to Joffrey – which Ned was thankful for.

“I am sure he will make a wonderful husband for your delightful daughter, my lord.” Lord Varys said genuinely.

"Why did you leave Lady Olenna with, as you say, the faintest of scents to follow?” Ned asked. "We did not discuss anything of the kind whilst you were in Winterfell."

The eunuch replied with a small smile. “I am sure they will enjoy their time in the North, Lord Stark. Lady Olenna most of all.” He chuckled. “Surely the King will permit you to return home for your daughter’s wedding? As for your question, the Tyrells remained loyal to the Targaryens in the rebellion, I do not believe it was entirely out of loyalty,” Varys giggled before continuing. “The Targaryens made them a Great House, I am sure they expected to receive even more had the Targaryens triumphed over the rebellion.”

Ned saw the wisdom in the eunuch’s words, but he did not agree with them entirely. He liked Lord Willas and Lady Margaery well enough and their father was no real mastermind. The Queen of Thorns, however, she was the true power of that family. Ned knew it was only a matter of time before she figured out the truth.

He decided to say no more on the matter.

“They will not be married immediately, Lord Varys.” Ned said in response to the man’s assumptions that Robert would let him attend Sansa’s wedding. “One of the conditions I insisted upon was that the marriage wait until after my daughter’s sixteenth nameday.”

It was a last-minute condition of Ned’s own making. Reading the letter Cat sent that confirmed his daughter was to be married caused a wave of protectiveness to wash over Ned.

‘She might be of an age to marry, but she is still my little girl.’ He said to himself, thinking fondly of his eldest daughter.

“And Lord Willas was agreeable to that? He seems to be a fair and honest young man.”

“That he is, Lord Varys.” Ned said honestly. “I admit, I did not expect to find such people in the South. I am not sorry to have been proven wrong.”

The Spider said nothing in reply to that, he merely smiled serenely.

Ned was about to suggest they end their meeting, he needed rest, but the eunuch asked a question that had him fully alert once more.

“Has young Jon made a decision about the Iron Throne, Lord Stark?” His voice was once more unrecognisable.

Ned had received no word from Jon, at least not in the traditional sense, but he knew that the figure he saw in the realm of the Gods spoke true.

“He has,” He answered slowly. “He has already acquired the proof of his birth. I do not know how
he intends to start, but I will do my best to ensure he has the support of the North.”

“He can count on mine, Lord Hand.” Varys said solemnly. “I have observed the boy ever since I learned the truth of him; he is not at all like our current crown prince.”

Ned had no reply to that, he still did not fully trust the eunuch despite knowing the man had had plenty of opportunities over the years to tell the truth of Jon.

“I have done my best to ensure that the Targaryen girl’s safety is assured, without it being too suspicious. I regret that Viserys is no longer among the living, but all I heard of him indicated he was following in his father’s footsteps.”

Ned was relieved to hear that The Spider was actively preventing the assassination of the pregnant girl. Ned had nothing but hatred for the Mad King, but he would not condemn his innocent daughter to death for it. If his son was indeed showing signs of his father’s madness, then perhaps the realm was better off without him breathing. Still, he felt for the girl who must now believe herself to be the last of her family.

Perhaps we might see about bringing her home? Once Jon is secure in his campaign, of course.” Ned suggested. “Though, if she is happy with her lot, it may be kinder to leave her where she is.”

“We shall see, my lord. This is a discussion for another time,” Lord Varys looked to the door with a strange expression. “I will take my leave; it seems that you have a visitor your guards cannot deter. Good day, Lord Stark.”

Ned turned in response to the pounding on his study door and stood to answer it. He turned back to advise Lord Varys to hide, but the chair he had been occupying was empty.

‘What in the name of winter is he?’ He asked himself as he looked around the study.

You will see. The hour to act is almost at hand. Ready yourself, and do not make the mistakes you believe honour compels you to, Eddard Stark.

‘I will not,’ He vowed once more as he walked to open the door before it was knocked off of its hinges.

He was greeted by Renly Baratheon, whose clothes were drenched with blood.


“It’s Robert, Ned.” Renly spluttered. “H-He—” He could barely form the words he wished to say. “We were on the hunt a-and he—”

“Take me to him, Renly.” Ned said firmly. His heart and mind racing.

Ready yourself, child.

Ned shuddered as he raced after Renly, the words of his Gods giving him no comfort for the first time since they spoke to him in the Godswood.

Everything is about to change, Eddard Stark.
Chapter End Notes

So, the mysterious man who was in Winterfell and Highgarden is Varys. I'm sure that was obvious but I wanted to build a little suspense up lol
I quite like Varys as a character and to keep with the more supernatural elements of my story - he will have certain abilities he did not have in canon. I'll be exploring this version of Varys in great detail once he meets with Jon and a certain lady in red!

Thanks for reading! Constructive criticism is welcome!
EDDARD VIII

Chapter Summary

My lords and ladies! I'm sorry for those who have left comments that have gone unanswered, the holidays are an extremely difficult time of the year for me, so I hope you'll forgive my seemingly ignorant nature.

I shall do my best to respond to your comments from here on out :) I feel this chapter is going to cause quite a few...

I appreciate all who read this little story of mine.

I would also like to thank Trident for including this story in his Fics of the Year. I'm deeply moved and honoured to be included in your list alongside writers such as Longclaw and Alperez... Two authors whose stories are a joy to read! Thank you for the inclusion of A Dream of Two Kings!

So, on with the chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He followed Renly to Robert’s chambers, his frantic pace matching that of the youngest Baratheon.

The members of the Kingsguard were gathered outside, their whispers sounding like a swarm of angry bees. They broke off when they noticed Renly and Ned approaching.

“My lords,” Ser Meryn Trant greeted them. He opened the door to the King’s chambers and Renly barged past him before it was fully open.

Ned hesitated before following him, he knew what he might be greeted with, and he was not sure he was ready for it.

“My lord,” Barristan Selmy appeared in the doorway, his armour was marked with blood and he looked pale. “The King wishes to see you.”

Nodding his head and steeling himself, Ned walked through the doorway and his heart almost stopped when he took in the scene before him.

Robert was sprawled on his large bed with Grandmaester Pycelle attending to him. Renly was pacing frantically around the room. He noticed the Queen and Tywin Lannister slightly off to the side, Cersei was wringing her hands and glancing around the room as if afraid. Tywin was much more controlled, his eyes snapped to Ned as soon as he entered and regarded him coldly, before giving the smallest of nods and returning his gaze to the King.

Ser Barristan remained by the door; his face was a picture of shame as his eyes rested on the man he was sworn to protect.

He walked over to his oldest friend, waves of emotion rolling off of him as he reached his side. Robert shooed Pycelle away by waving his hand weakly and Ned was able to see what ailed the King.

The lower half of his torso was a picture of gore. It looked as if he had been stabbed repeatedly by some crazed assailant. He could smell the various concoctions Pycelle must have been using to stop the bleeding and prevent the wounds from festering, but Ned knew it would be for naught. Robert Baratheon was dying.

“Robert,” Ned said gently, as he lowered himself to the King’s side. “What happened?”

It was Renly who answered.

“We were on the hunt and there was a boar, a monstrous thing—” He stopped in a vain attempt to gather himself. “Robert insisted on facing it alone and it, well—”

“It got me, Ned,” Robert said as loudly as he could, but it was still little more than a whisper. “Nearly sent me into the air,” His weak laugh quickly became a series of coughs that shook the bedframe. “But I got it as well, Ned. I drove my blade right through it.”

“You never could let anyone else have the last word, old friend,” Ned said, unable to think of the man before him as anything but his greatest friend. He regretted it as it caused Robert to have another coughing fit when he laughed.

“Now you can jest, Ned. I’m on my deathbed and you finally find a sense of humour,” He said with traces of laughter still in his voice. His face became more serious as he looked at Ned. “Ned, there are things I must tell you. All of you,” He spoke a little louder to address the others in the room. “Out. I wish to speak with Ned alone.”

Robert, my love,” Cersei began, speaking for the first time since Ned arrived. “Surely I can—”

“I said out, Cersei, damn you,” He winced as he attempted to sit up to glare at his wife. “I may be dying, but I am still King.”

They all shuffled from the room, Cersei fixed Ned with a nervous gaze as her father swept her away. The look Tywin gave Ned before he reached the doorway was chilling.

“Wait—” Robert said, causing the five departing figures to halt. “Selmy, you stay. Get Ned something to write with. You will serve as witness.”


"OUT!” Robert managed to yell, the effort costing him dearly as his face contorted in pain.

With one last fearful look at Ned, Cersei and her father left with Renly and Pycelle. It was only the the two of them and Ser Barristan now.

_The moment is here. Do not fall prey to your instincts, child. Remember all you have seen and know that it may still come to pass if you falter._

‘I will not falter,’ He answered his Gods a little more forcefully than he intended. ‘I will do what I must, it is why I am here.’

_Words are wind, Eddard Stark. The last piece of the truth is about to be yours. Use it to fully_
condemn the man before you or use it to allow him the chance to redeem himself before our brother claims him.

‘What do you mean?’

You will see. The moment is here. Prepare yourself.

He jumped as he noticed the parchment and ink pot Ser Barristan was holding under him. They were shaking as the man who held them to him trembled, his face still a mask of shame and defeat.

“Thank you, Ser Barristan.” Ned answered, taking the parchment and inkpot and placing them on the stand beside the bed. He nodded at the man as he accepted the quill and returned his attention to Robert.

“What is it you wish to tell me, Robert?” Ned asked, nervous after hearing his God’s words.

Robert looked at him with an expression that matched the one on Ser Barristan’s. His breathing became even more laboured as he looked at the man he grew up with.

“First,” He cleared his throat, wincing with the discomfort it must have sent through his body. “My will. Joffrey is not ready for that damn chair. You will act as his regent until he is ready, damn what his mother and Tywin say. Write this down, Ned.”

Ned uncapped the inkpot and smoothed out the parchment on the wooden writing tray Barristan had just carried over to him. He dipped his quill into the ink and began to write the words Robert spoke.

He held the tray in front of Robert when he was finished so he could sign it. The signature was messier than usual given the effort it had taken the King to hold the quill.

“Selmy,” Robert wheezed. “Sign it as well.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The knight answered, accepting the quill from Ned and adding his own signature next to Robert’s.

“Ned, that woman and her father will try and bend my son to them,” Robert said, showing concern for his son for what might be the first time. “You can’t let them, Ned. Help him, make sure he is better at this than I ever was. Promise me, Ned.”

He could not help the tears that fell from his eyes as his best friend repeated the words that his sister had used so many years ago. She was also in a bed of blood and dying. Now, so too was his friend.

“Robert—” He had to tell him of Joffrey, he could not let his last promise to his friend be a lie. “Your son, he—”

He could not continue as the pain seized him. The greatest pain he had ever known. He felt as if his very bones were on fire, his blood was boiling as it clawed through his veins like shards of glass.

They warned you, foolish child. Hold your tongue, hear the words of your friend and then you will see. I will not be so lenient as they would with your foolish need to protect your honour.

The voice was different from that of his Gods, there was only one and it sounded much less serene. It filled him with fear that had nothing to do with the pain it was causing him.
The pain ended as suddenly as it had started.

“Lord Stark?” He heard Ser Barristan’s concerned voice.

“Apologies,” He said, shaking from the wrath that was just visited upon him. “I am overwhelmed by this. My friend he—”

“Ned,” Robert said with urgency, his voice weaker than ever. “I need to tell you. You’ll hate me for it, but I need you to know.”

That managed to break through the shock of what his Gods had just done to him.

‘Is he about to confess that he was the one to order the deaths of the Targaryen children?’ Ned could not think of anything else his friend could only confess on his deathbed.

Remembering the words of his Gods, that whatever Robert says could either condemn or redeem him, Ned urged his friend to speak.

“Selmy,” He addressed the knight once more. “Send the rest of the Kingsguard away. I will not have them interfere.”

He did as he was commanded, though he did not look happy about it. He returned to the room and closed the door and looked at his King for further instructions.

“Whatever happens, Selmy, do not interfere. You’re here only to confirm that Ned hasn’t made this up, should he wish to tell the realm. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, Your Grace.” Barristan answered uncertainly. He looked as if he wanted to protest, but he knew it would prove futile.

“Robert, what is this?” Ned was truly confused now. “What will I tell the realm? I—”

“Lyanna,” Robert whispered, his eyes full of fear and his voice tinged with regret as he looked at Ned. “You must have the truth of it, Ned.”

He had not been expecting Robert to say anything about Lyanna. He could do nothing but look at the man before him, the man who had the demeanour of a child caught playing where they ought not.

Remember our words. Condemn or redeem.

He was too engrossed in the man before him that he did not even respond to his Gods.

“Ned, you must know—” His voice was ragged but he spoke despite the pain it must have caused him. “Rhaegar, he never took her. He—” He closed his eyes before continuing. “She left me a letter. She went with him—”

Ned stood as his breath hitched, he could not believe he was hearing this. He heard the sudden shift of Ser Barristan’s armour, but he paid it no attention, focusing intently on the man before him.

“What are you saying? Where is this letter?” He demanded, uncaring of the fact that his friend was dying now.

“Ned, please,” Robert pleaded, his eyes filling with tears and attempting to sit up once more. “Seven hells!” He exclaimed as he fell back to the bed.
“Robert, answer me.” Ned said, he allowed him several moments to steady his breath. “Please.”

“Ned, she did not wish to marry me,” He could hear the pain in Robert’s voice as he spoke. “She told me, but your father insisted. I wanted her, Ned. I loved her, I truly did, but,” He stopped to open his eyes and looked fearfully at the man towering above him. “She did not feel the same for me. I read the letter and then I tossed it in the fire. I was angry, Ned.”

“What did this letter say, Robert?” Ned forced himself to stay calm, but his hands were shaking with suppressed fury. He looked over his shoulder at Ser Barristan and saw his face a picture of shock and anger as well.

“It hurt me deeply, I could never forget what she wrote even if I wanted to,” Robert winced as he tried to sit up once more. “She wrote of how she felt for Rhaegar. That they intended to wed after he annulled his marriage with Elia. She could bear no more children. I was angry, Ned. I wanted her and he took her from me. I—”

“Why did you not tell me? My father died because he believed her taken. My brother died because he believed her taken!”

“She said in her letter she also wrote your father, that she and Rhaegar would travel to Winterfell after he dealt with The Mad King. Ned, I don’t know why Brandon did what he did. I could not think of anything but—”

“Why did you not tell me?” He repeated, roaring at the dying man.

There was silence for what might have been hours. He looked at Ser Barristan once again, certain that he was ready to defend Robert from Ned’s assault, but he was regarding the King with disgust and took no notice of Ned’s gaze.

“He took the woman I loved. His father butchered the men who should have been my goodfather and goodbrother. The Mad King would have killed us, Ned. He ordered Jon to send him our heads,” Robert’s voice was pleading. “We had to kill them; we would not have been safe. When I saw Rhaegar on the Trident, I snapped. The last word he said was her name and it only enraged me further. I—” His face contorted with a storm of emotions. Anger, regret, pain, shame and guilt. “Ned, please.”

He could only look at the man before him. He felt pity and hatred for the dying man, the one he had been raised with. The man he saw dote on his newborn bastard daughter before losing interest.

You were told to gather allies, Eddard Stark. This is a chance to do just that. To wound or to soothe, tell them the truth. Say nothing of the golden-haired children.

Again, he did not respond to his Gods, but he understood their meaning. He turned once more to look at Ser Barristan.

“Ser Barristan,” He said calmly. “On your honour as a Kingsguard, I would ask you to swear not to repeat what I am about to say to anyone. I—”

“I cannot stand by and let you harm my King,” The knight said, moving forward.

“Selmy, leave him—”

“I will not harm him,” Ned spoke over Robert. “Not with my hands, but it is time I tell him the truth. The truth I have kept from the realm all these years, just as he has. Please, your word, Ser Barristan.”
He looked uncertainly at Robert, who nodded at him.

“Very well, Lord Stark. You have my word.”

“Thank you, please ensure there are none lingering outside, and then join me at the King’s bedside.”

He turned back to the man who had been his greatest friend, ignoring the fearful and confused look on his face.

“Ned, what—”

“Soon.” He cut across him, unable to stand his voice.

When Ser Barristan did as Ned asked and was stood by him at Robert’s bedside, Ned took the seat by the nightstand and looked at both men before beginning.

“I know that Lyanna went with Rhaegar willingly,” He raised a hand to halt the protests of both men. “I did not know until the end. When I found Lyanna dying in a tower in Dorne.”

“How—” Robert began, but Ned spoke over him.

“They were married, Robert. I have the proof of their marriage and the annulment of Rhaegar’s first. It is all safely secured in the North.”

“They married, but she was—” Robert spluttered before another coughing fit descended upon him.

“Lord Stark, is this true? You are not just saying it to wound the King?” Ser Barristan asked, his face even more pale than before.

“No, Ser Barristan. I am not.” He answered solemnly. “As I have said, I have the proof of my words in the North. At least, I did until the documents were collected.”

Robert manage to gain control of himself, but there was even less colour in his face now than there had been before. He did not have long.

"How did she die, Ned?” Was it him?"

He shook his head, praying for confirmation that this was the right thing to do.

Proceed. Your friend is not long for this world, the choice is yours, but it must be made. Condemn or redeem. The battle will not be waged solely in the living lands, after all.

He would ask them to explain their words later, what mattered now was telling the truth to the man he called friend for so long.

“When my companions and I arrived at the tower, we were stopped by three of your brothers, Ser Barristan,” He looked at the man at his side as he spoke, knowing that he had heard this part of the tale. “They would not permit me access and a fight ensued. Despite our advantage in numbers, we were outmatched. Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold fell, but Ser Arthur slew everyone but me. He would have killed me, but then Lyanna screamed and distracted him enough for Howland Reed to stab him in the back,” He winced as the Bold gasped at his words, but he had to tell them it all before Robert fell into unconsciousness. “I ended his suffering and rushed into the tower. I found her there, in a bed of blood—”

“What did he do to her, Ned?” Robert demanded; his voice full of anger despite the death pallor on
him. “The damn dragon what did he—”

“He got her with child.” He said. He would have found the way Robert’s eyes bulged and his mouth hung open comical, were it not for the seriousness of the situation. He looked at the man beside him whose expression matched Robert’s. “Again, I swear this is the truth. I found her after she gave birth to her child - hers and Rhaegar’s child. She was dying, the birth was too much, it—” He choked a little as the memory came flooding in, but he knew he needed to push on. “She begged me to protect the child, to ensure he did not end up like his brother and sister. To protect him from you.” He finished as he looked at the dying man.

Robert’s tears were flowing freely once more. He looked as if Ned had added his own wounds to the gore that was to take his life. His mouth moved without sound as he looked at Ned with desperate eyes.

“Does he live?” Robert finally managed to ask.

“Yes.”

“Where? Why have I not—”

“You would have killed him Robert or had Tywin Lannister set his beast upon him.” Ned spat.

“Lyanna’s boy? No, no,” Robert sobbed. “I would not—” His breath hitched as his sobs were joined by another barrage of whooping coughs.

“Where is the boy?” Ser Barristan demanded, his face rigid with determination.

He waited for Robert’s coughing fit to end before answering, aware that the man looked as if he would fall unconscious at any moment.

“I raised him in Winterfell. You’ve met him, Ser Barristan. As have you,” He said as he turned to Robert, whose expression was one of confusion. “I protected your reign, your hold on the throne, instead of seating my nephew on it. It was his, from the moment he was born. I was blinded by my love for you as brother.” He felt a pang of guilt as he saw Robert’s face fall. “I named him because Lyanna died before she could. I raised him alongside my own children, as their brother, I raised him as my bastard son, Jon Snow.”

He saw the realisation dawn on the faces of the two men.

“The boy, he is—” Barristan stammered. “Truly?”

Ned nodded, looking at Robert as he waited for the dying man to speak.

“Ned,” He wheezed, his eyes closed and breathing shallow. “Forgive me. Please, Ned. I was angry. I never wanted the throne until I saw it and knew it could be mine.” He opened his eyes and Ned was concerned how unfocused they were. “H-how can I make this right?”

Now, make your choice, Eddard Stark.

He looked at the man before him, his face hopeful but full of regret as well. He turned his gaze to the Kingsguard at his side who was weeping silently.

“The Targaryen girl,” Robert croaked. “Spare her. Tell them to call it off. Tell Joffrey he—”

“Robert, my nephew intends to claim the Iron Throne.” He cut the man off. Careful to not confess
the truth of the boy he believes to be his blood. “There will be another war, and whoever wins will have another to wage once it is over. One that is more important than any throne.”

“Wha—” Robert began.

“I will not waste your final hours in this world explaining a truth you cannot accept.” Ned said, speaking over him once more. “You ask how you can make this right?” He held up the King’s will and continued. “Try to spare the realm from another war. Relinquish the hold you have on the throne by right of conquest, name my nephew as your successor and save the lives of your family.”

Robert gaped in response to Ned’s words, but he did not speak. “My nephew knows of the threats to come, Robert. He will not stop until he can unite this realm to face it. The price of my forgiveness is what I have just said, Robert. And,” He hated himself for the final touch he was about to add. “Should you meet with Lyanna in the next world, you will be able to tell her that you tried to save her son from dying in a war for what is rightfully his.”

He let the silence fall as he ended his speech. He knew it was a risk, and that it would probably be futile because the Lannisters would never allow their hold on power to be broken. Still, he had to offer the man a chance to redeem himself before he died because, despite having learned that he knew his sister was never taken and raped, he was still the man he counted as a brother.

He looked once more at the silent Kingsguard and was about to ask him of his intent, but the Bold spoke first.

“Whatever the King decides,” He gestured at Robert. “Your nephew will have my sword, if he wishes. I will serve Rhaegar’s son as I served his father whether he sits the throne or not.”

Ned nodded at the man, unable to speak with the relief he felt.

Ser Barristan might not bring an army with him, but he brought his reputation and, once he saw them, would be able to testify that the proof of Jon’s identity was no forgery.

They both looked to Robert as he started to speak.

“The Lannisters, Ned, they’ll never—” He was barely able to form the words, but determination was colouring his dying face. “My children, what will happen to them if—”

“I swear to you, Robert, on the memory of my sister and fallen kin, that I will ensure those children are protected. Jon will not harm them; he is not Tywin Lannister.”

Robert nodded after a few moments, then he gestured to the parchment in Ned’s hand.

“Tear that up,” He croaked. “And write my new will, do it quickly while I can still sign it, Ned.”

Once it was done, he handed Robert’s will to Ser Barristan knelt once more before Robert.

“I forgive you, Robert,” He said as he grasped the man’s hand in his own. “I do not think this will be enough to prevent a full-scale war, but it is a start. I am grateful you have done it, and I will ensure Lyanna’s son knows you honoured her memory with your final act.”

“The boy, Ned,” He managed to say despite how weak he looked. “In a better world he would have been mine own, he—” Robert coughed once more, the rattle in his voice was growing as he continued to speak. “Will I see her, Ned? Wherever I go when I die?”

Ned was not sure if he would, but he could not bring himself to crush the hopeful look on Robert’s face.
“Aye, Robert,” He said with a small smile. “I don’t think Lyanna will allow you to get away without a scolding. I doubt even the Gods would dare stand in her way, but she will know what you’ve done. She will.”

Robert nodded, briefly closing his eyes before he opened them with a renewed expression.

“Selmy,” He whispered, continuing when the Kingsguard leaned in closer. “Send for that old fool Pycelle, tell him to bring me milk of the poppy.”

Ser Barristan nodded and went off to do as Robert commanded. Probably the last order he would ever receive from Robert.

“Am I a coward for wanting to go in my sleep?” Robert asked.

Ned recalled all the men he had seen die. Some at his own hand. He recalled his sister’s death and the bloodiness of the memory. He saw the visions the Gods had shown him of Jon and Catelyn’s deaths and Robb’s corpse being defiled.

“No, Robert,” Ned answered honestly, smiling down at his friend and squeezing the hand he still held. “It is not cowardly to want to pass peacefully into the next world, remember though,” He added, allowing his voice to take on a lighter note. “If Lyanna is there to greet you, it won’t be a peaceful welcome.”

They laughed like they had so often during their time together in The Eyrie. Even as the racking coughs shook Robert’s body, they allowed themselves to bask in this moment.

Ned knew this was only the calm before the storm for him. He knew there would be wars regardless of Robert’s will. He would act as his Gods instructed, but he knew that even if he followed their guidance to the letter blood would be spilled eventually.

It was more for Robert’s soul that he asked him to compose a new will, his act of forgiveness for his lifelong friend.

Yes, this is the calm before the storm for Ned, but it is the end for the Stormlord who became King.

Nothing ever truly ends. You have done well, Eddard Stark. This was a test for you as much as it was for your friend. Mourn for your friend, but be ready, child.

‘Thank you,” He said to his Gods as he felt their embrace.

Chapter End Notes

I know... The will and Robert's confession is OOC and unexpected, but I have the plot for the story post Robert's death mapped out and this felt like the best way to set it up. Needless to say, the fact that Robert has relinquished his right to throne will not matter one lick to the Lannisters and a certain Mannis... but we'll get to that!

I hope this sudden turn in the plot has not dissuaded any from reading further!

Constructive criticism is always welcome!
Tyrion often imagined what it would be like to be someone else. That he was born a dwarf made him envious of almost every other man he met. Still, at least he was a Lannister dwarf, so most men would be envious of him - even though they could look at the faces of others without getting a stiff neck.

He wished daily that he was not a dwarf, but it was very, very rare that he wished he was not a Lannister. Today was to be one of those rare days.

He had been sitting in his quarters feeling sorry for himself when his lord father and hated sister intruded upon his reflections.

The two were the reason he felt out of place in the capital. True, his lord father rarely visited the place, but his sister was a permanent resident, being the Queen and all. It was her presence that ensured Tyrion’s stay would not be a pleasant one.

Tywin Lannister never made any attempts to hide his disdain for his youngest son, but the moment he arrived in the capital things went from bad to worse. His delightful and selectively dutiful sister had wasted no time informing their father of his behaviour in the North – and the resulting scolding from its Lord Paramount.

He knew his lord father would be livid with how Tyrion conducted himself; not because he should not have done so but because he had been discovered doing so.

‘A Lannister does as he wishes, so long as it brings no shame upon his name,’ His father had often said to him.

No, it was because he had been caught acting in a way that would shame the precious family name that Tywin directed his fury at his youngest son. His fear of his lord father as he berated and threatened him was matched only by his hatred for his gloating sister.

‘One day, I’ll have a few victories of mine own,’ He comforted himself with thoughts of retribution. ‘Father will see that out of all his children, it was his most hated who inherited the traits he prides himself on. Cersei, for all she believes herself to be Tywin with teats, is little more than a spoiled idiot – much like her son.’

The boy, Joffrey, was growing even more unpleasant to be around. He knew the realm would suffer when the throne became his and he prays that day would be long in the future.

Just like his wish to no longer be a dwarf, it seems that wish was also not to be.

He choked on the wine that he had just started to swallow as his door crashed open. His lord father and sister crossing the threshold and closing it with equal force before both turned their Lannister eyes upon their hated kin.

“Put that down,” His lord father commanded, his tone making it clear Tyrion was not to disobey. “We must move quickly.”

It took him a few moments to clear his throat and supress the urge to cough up the wine he
managed to force down. His eyes were watering as he noticed how unsettled Cersei was.

“Why? What has happened?” He asked Tywin, knowing he would get nothing but scorn from his sister.

“The King is dying,” Tywin answered without emotion. “He sent all but Eddard Stark and Barristan Selmy from the room. We must prepare ourselves for what will come from their private conversation.”

Tyrion struggled to speak once more, but it was the news his father had delivered that choked him now.

‘Robert is dying.’ He repeated the words in his head, but they did not sound any less horrifying. ‘The boy is to be King before anyone has had the chance to rein him in.’

Just like that, he knew his life in the capital would become much worse. Joffrey had always resented him for being the uncle that scolded him – physically if the situation called for it, sometimes even if it did not. Now, he would most likely receive his due for his treatment of the impending monarch.

“Are you so drunk that you cannot form words?” His father’s voice broke through his thoughts. “The lowest of the Lannisters you may be, but you have wits your brother and sister do not. Your family needs those wits now, if we are to ensure Joffrey’s reign begins strong.”

His words had unintentionally lifted Tyrion’s spirits even though it was a compliment to strengthen the insult. Praise was rare from Tywin Lannister, so he would savour it.

His satisfaction grew when he noticed the way Cersei looked at their father as he spoke of her and Jaime. She dared not berate him as she would anyone else, but her expression made it clear she was biting her tongue from responding.

“There is no way Joffrey will have Lord Stark as his Hand,” Tyrion began, feeling strangely confident under his father’s unrelenting gaze. “I assume he would name you, once my sister suggests it to him, and Lord Stark will be free to return to his frozen homeland.”

“Yes, but what if the choice is taken from Joffrey?” His father quickly shot back.

That was enough to cause Cersei to finally loose her tongue.

“No one will take that choice from Joff,” She spat. “He will sit the throne and his word will be final in all matters. If Lord Stark tries to hold on to his position, he will be committing treason against his rightful King. There—”

“At this moment, Robert is still his rightful King,” Tywin said over Cersei, his voice had not been raised but it caused Cersei to clamp her mouth shut. “He wished to speak with Lord Stark alone and had Ser Barristan stay to bear witness to whatever it is they are discussing. What do you imagine that could be?”

Tywin did not take his eyes off of Cersei’s seething face, but Tyrion knew his question was directed at him.

He felt the familiar squirm as his mind scrambled, desperate to not disappoint his father and be on the receiving end of his wrath once more. The scenarios that were running through his mind seemed unlikely; it took all he had to supress a smirk when he thought of a particular one but in the end, he arrived at what he felt was the reason for the private discussion.
“Robert is composing his will and he knows that whatever it is will not be taken well by—” He cut himself off as he looked at his sister, not wanting to escalate the situation in front of their father.

“Go on.” Tywin commanded, his eyes fixed on Tyrion and ignoring the look Cersei was giving him.

“He knows that it will not be taken well by Cersei and Joffrey. That is why he had the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard stay to bear witness, everyone knows the Bold will never allow his sworn King’s will to be forged.”

His father only nodded in response to Tyrion’s words, but Cersei directed her venomous tongue at him as though it had all been his idea.

“Joff is his heir. If he is having Stark compose his will, there is no reason that it will prevent Joff from taking his rightful throne. You would love it if—”

“Enough!” Tywin said sharply, cutting Cersei off before she could hit her stride.

He knew it was only a matter of time before Cersei accused him of wishing for anything that would harm the Lannister name. Whenever a potential threat to their family arose, there was always some way Tyrion was involved in it. Fortunately, their father was intent on dealing with the issue before them, even though he also took pleasure in reminding Tyrion how he was failing his family.

“There will be time for the two of you to bicker like children later,” Tywin continued without looking at either of them, beginning to pace around the room as he often did when in thought. “Robert charging Lord Stark with composing his will seems most likely. Selmy is the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and is sworn to protect Robert in all things, that means he would see his will enforced.”

“You think Stark will attempt to convince him to steal—” Cersei unwisely began.

“Have you learned nothing of the man?” Father asked her, not even waiting for an answer before beginning his tirade. “Unlike the rest of the graspers in this city, he has no wish for the throne. It is clear that he is here only because the King all but commanded him to be. He will gladly return to the North when Joffrey takes his throne and that is what we will instruct Joffrey to allow him to do.” He narrowed his eyes as Cersei opened her mouth, which was enough to shut it once more. “He will be thanked for his service, rewarded as is appropriate and then he will return to Winterfell. After he has attended Robert’s funeral and sworn fealty to the new King.”

He knew Lord Stark would do what was required of him, but he would hate to have to bend the knee to the boy he refused to betroth his daughter to. That precious honour of his would compel him to do so, however, so Tywin was correct in that regard, but Cersei was never one to take any insult to her precious son.

“Yes, he will pledge himself to his rightful King and then he will return to his wasteland of a home to freeze and die,” She said hotly. “Robert should have named you or Jaime as his Hand. It was foolish to allow Stark to gain influence in the capital, he could—”

“Any influence he has gained has only been made possible because of you. You should have convinced Robert to accept the Tyrell girl for Joffrey, instead of demanding he refuse. You wish to be the only woman to have a hold over him, but he will need to marry to secure his rule or—”

“His rule will already be secure! He is the rightful—” Cersei stopped herself before she could say
too much, but Tyrion knew the damage had been done. “Father, I—”

“You will have that son of yours offer his hand in marriage to the Tyrell girl,” Tywin said coldly, advancing on his daughter. “The Tyrells are the second wealthiest family in the realm, and they can field the largest army. A strong ally makes for a stronger enemy if given cause, I will not have that cause be your need to have a say in the ruling of the realm. You will do as I say, or you will be married off to one of my bannermen the moment Robert’s body is cold in his grave, so that you might learn your place. Do you understand?”

If it had been anyone else, Tyrion knew his sister would claw at that person for speaking to her in such a way. Alas, it was their father, so she could do nothing but nod once and channel her hatred into her expression.

“The most dangerous outcome is that Robert names Lord Stark as regent until Joffrey is of age to rule independently,” Tywin said, calm once more as he turned to Tyrion. “If that is the case, there is little we can do to prevent the King’s will from being enforced – especially since Ser Barristan Selmy himself witnessed the will being dictated. You will inform me of the King’s will the moment it is announced,” He said as he began to make for the door.

“Where are you going?” Cersei demanded before Tyrion could speak.

Tywin stopped and glared at his daughter before answering her.

“I will be instructing your brother to asses which members of the Kingsguard are loyal to Robert or to gold. It will be of use should we need to act,” He said without emotion once more. “After I have done that, well, that will all depend on what exactly Robert dictates in his will. If it had been only Eddard Stark we could have discredited whatever it may be, unfortunately your brother is correct in no one believing Ser Barristan would condone his King's will being forged.” He fixed his gaze upon Cersei. "You will do nothing without my leave, we cannot risk this unknown situation taking a dire turn because of your stupidity and shortsightedness. Neither of you will act without first consulting me, is that understood?"

“Yes, father,” Tyrion and Cersei answered at the same time.

With a satisfied nod, Tywin was gone from the room and Tyrion was left alone with his sister.

His seething sister who needed to vent the anger and scorn she had been suppressing.

“As soon as you arrived here you went to see Stark,” She began calmly, but Tyrion knew that would change quickly. “Was this the true reason for that visit? You want to see this House undone; this is a way you can achieve that. Father might not allow himself to see it, but I do.” She took a few steps towards Tyrion. “I’ll not stand idly by whilst you and your northern savages attempt to take my son’s throne—”

“Father had just warned us not to do anything that he did not—”

“My father told us we needed to prepare for what comes after that northern fool has made Robert’s will known to the realm,” Cersei cut across him. “The Tyrells would have my son marry their little whore so that they can rule in all but name, and now Stark is attempting to do the same. I will not have it; I will deal with any threat to my son’s reign regardless of what father says.”

“Whatever victory you may achieve, you will not have long to enjoy it before father makes good on his word,” Tyrion replied, eager to inflict some wounds of his own. “Perhaps he will wed you to a reasonably young lord, perhaps he might even have a full head of hair and be less corpulent than
“Jaime will kill whoever father tries to sell me to!” Cersei roared, spittle lashing Tyrion’s face as she stood over him. “He tolerated Robert because he was King, he won’t tolerate some filthy old lord’s hands on my body instead of—” She cut off with wide eyes and took a few steps back. Her features were once more controlled by the time she glared back at him with her hand poised over the handle of the door. “One day, father will see you for the scheming murderer you are. If he is to send me from the capital, I pray I get to the chance to see the look on your face when you realise your lies will serve you no longer.”

She opened the door and marched off without closing it before Tyrion could reply.

It was just as well because he had no reply to what his sister had just said. The outburst itself was not uncharacteristic of Cersei; he had seen many of her tantrums growing up. No, it was what she had said and her reaction when she realised what she was saying. She was always certain Jaime would side with her in all things, even after he had sided with Tyrion in certain situations. She has always been possessive of her twin brother, but has he misjudged just how possessive?

‘Jaime has always been protective of Cersei, too,’ He reasoned, attempting to stave off the ridiculous suspicion that was building in his mind. ‘I cannot imagine how it must have felt for him to guard Robert’s bedchambers whilst he was laying with Cersei. Still, brotherly jealousy has its limits.’

He could believe that Cersei would lust after Jaime because he was her twin. She would see him as some twisted extension of herself; the man that she would never be. Jaime, however, he was not the kind of man to lust after anyone it seemed. He had his pick of the women, his vow of celibacy be damned, he could lay with a different woman every night.

‘Jaime is not Cersei, no matter how alike they look,’ He said as the idea became even more outlandish. ‘Cersei might lust after her twin, but Jaime is not as much of a narcissist as our beloved sister is.’

Still, it was enough to make him suspicious. He would not do anything to draw attention to himself, however. If Joffrey is to be King then he would seize the first opportunity he had to punish Tyrion, even if he commits no actual crimes.

‘Robert may not have been a reasonable man nor an effective ruler,’ He said to himself as he closed the door his sister left open and returned to the wine once more. ‘But he is a septon compared to his heir, there isn’t enough of Robert in the boy to balance out the Cersei within him. He is all Lannister, with none of the good parts.’

He downed what would be the first of many glasses that night, he would make the most of this time to let loose with his indulgences. He could not afford to let his tongue lash out in a drunken state with the boy as King. Unlike Lord Stark, Joffrey would not show any leniency or understanding.

“Long live the King,” He toasted to thin air. “May his reign be long and prosperous and, most of all, free of any dwarf slaying.”

He laughed at his own little jape before draining another glass. He continued to laugh as he thought of the look on Joffrey’s face should Lord Stark be appointed his regent; he would not be able to laugh openly but he knew it would be a sight to see.

‘His face will be a nice shade of Lannister red to match his Lannister gold hair,’ He said to himself
as he laughed harder, closing his eyes to try and lock the image in his mind.

“Yes, it would be a shame for his reign to begin with kinslaying.” A strange voice reached him over his laughter.

His eyes snapped open and he dropped the glass he was holding, he did not even flinch as he heard it smash, his eyes were fixed on the man who was now sitting opposite him as if he had been there for hours.

“V-Varys,” He managed to say. “I did not hear you come in, what are you—”

“There are many doors in the Red Keep, my lord,” The Spider said smoothly, a benign smile fixed on his face. “Most of them do not appear to doors at all, but they have hinges just the same. Maegor went to great lengths to ensure the secrets hidden in this place would not be found easily.”

“What is it you want? The King,” He realised why the eunuch must be here, though he was still unsettled by his sudden appearance. “Has he—”

“He has a few more hours, I would say,” Varys cut across him. “Despite the damage he has done to his body over the years, he is still an uncommonly strong man. It is the only thing allowing him to linger long enough to converse with his oldest friend.”

“And what do you think they are talking about, Lord Varys?” Tyrion asked in a voice of forced calm. He could not waste the opportunity to learn from the spy master who could travel through the Red Keep like a shadow.

“The same thing I have come to discuss with you, Lord Tyrion,” The eunuch answered in a voice that was much more different than the one he heard seconds before. “The future of the realm.”

Chapter End Notes

I originally planned to write this from Cersei’s POV, but I struggled to get in her head the way I like to when I write so I went with Tyrion instead.

Tywin is someone I am quite excited to write about, regardless of his personality and deeds he was one of of my favourite characters! A lot of his work will be done behind the scenes, but we’ll see the ramifications of those actions before long!

Yes, Tyrion could believe that Cersei lusts after Jaime as an extension of herself and her narcissism, but he does not see Jaime reciprocating those feelings he suspects Cersei of having. I intend to explore this in Tyrion’s later chapters.

Varys! He is a sneaky littel fella, isn't he?
Jon had spent his entire life within the walls of Winterfell. He had grown used to the comforts of a castle; despite the scorn he had received from the lady of said castle.

He has been travelling for months now, much longer than he initially planned to. He could now appreciate just how vast the northernmost kingdom truly was, though his progress was slow because of the company he kept.

The journey had been almost easy when they could hide their mythical companion under the trees, but the North has its fair share of open fields and barren stretches of land so this was not always possible. Fortunately, this was not much of a problem as Nyx continued to develop.

She was still far from obedient, but he could feel just how much stronger their connection was now. She would listen to him when he instructed her to wait within the confines of whatever cover she had found for herself during the day, but she would refuse to heed his instructions at all as soon as night fell. Her black scales and strange ability to shut off the pulsating veins that covered her body allowed her to blend in with the night sky.

She would always greet him with great affection, often spending minutes purring under his touch before she would take off into the sky and he would not see her until the following night. One night, she did not return to him at all and he did not see her until the night after. It has not happened since, but he was wary of just how far she could fly away from him and who might see her.

‘She is starting to range as all creatures do,’ He thought to himself as he watched her take flight. ‘There is no telling how many miles she can range for, she could probably cross the entire north in one night if she chooses to.’

He could not believe just how large she had grown and how quickly. She was born large, but to see her now was something even he struggled to comprehend.

She was longer than he was and her back reached just under Jon's ribs when stood erect - taller by far when she reared on her hind legs. Her wingspan was perhaps just shy of eight feet and her body had changed in other ways. The budding horns were growing sharp and resembled a crown upon her head, her already rock-hard hide felt as tough as steel and her four legs rippled with muscle and ended in wickedly sharp claws.

The strange glow that originated from the markings on her body had also changed; the purple had faded almost entirely, and the white had been replaced with a shade of red that resembled the Valyrian dragon egg his uncle Aemon had given him. The eyes remained the same shade of purple but the jewel-like crest on her forehead was also slowly changing to red.

It was when these red veins began to overtake the purple that the change he had been dreading occurred. The first time she breathed fire, he thought she would torch their camp, but somehow only the ground and her dinner for that evening were scorched with her flames. She had been almost too warm to touch since that first night.

Nyx's sudden ability to breathe fire caused a strange change in Jon as well, at least, he was certain it was because of Nyx and her fiery awakening.
The fever came to him suddenly, it hit him as if he had been thrown into a boiling pot. He all but fell from his horse and barely had the strength to keep his eyes open. Melisandre had prayed frantically and Maro had given him some concoction he learned of somewhere in Essos. Nothing helped and he feared that he would die that very night.

Ghost had saved him once more; he was certain of that.

His snowy white direwolf had been away since first light that day, he relished the freedom of hunting and running free it seemed. When he returned that night and noticed the state Jon was in, he immediately sprinted to his side and rested his head on his bare chest.

Jon could still remember the instant relief he felt the moment Ghost’s blood-soaked jaw touched him. The fever had not broken but he felt a little strength return to him and he was sure he would no longer catch fire – he had genuinely been worried about that.

After almost a week of being too lethargic to mount his horse, he was finally able to resume his journey to the Neck. He still experienced regular bursts of fever that almost floored him, but the chilling presence of Ghost was enough to keep it manageable. He knew in his heart that the reason for these bursts of fever were because of Nyx and her own growing fire, but not even Melisandre could offer a suitable reason as to why this would happen.

Luckily, Ghost seemed to help balance out the intense heat he felt, but Jon knew this was not a long-term solution.

His direwolf had also grown considerably in the months they had been travelling. His head was now of a height with Jon’s elbow, his paws were each the size of Jon’s forehead (he found that out the hard way) and his once awkward pup build had been replaced with a large yet lean frame. He still had not made a single sound beyond his barely audible breathing.

“My lord?”

He was pulled out of his thoughts as he took note of Melisandre beside him. Maro and Garret often fell straight to sleep once they had shared their evening meal. Garret had yet to complain but Maro made his dissatisfaction known at every opportunity.

Melisandre, had never once uttered a word of discomfort when they had to make camp at a particularly uncomfortable spot. In fact, he was not sure he had ever seen her sleep; she volunteered to take first watch more than any of them.

“What is it, my lady?”

“I am not familiar with this land, but I do feel that we will conclude this part of our journey tomorrow.” Her voice was soft but still had that hint of mystery. “I have seen in the flames that another will join us to lead us to this moving castle, I do not know the face I saw in the fire, but he will mean us no harm.”

“Can you be certain of that? The first strangers we met on our travels tried to kill us.”

He did not wish to be short with the woman, she had been with him all this time and never once demanded anything of him. Still, the memory of his first kill continued to haunt him; more than his hatching a dragon and acquiring a legendary sword, a second dragon egg and witnessing a dragon fly – it was the memory of his first kill that he considered the greatest of all the changes he had been forced to endure.

“I am certain the Lord does not wish to test you again so soon,” Melisandre answered calmly. “Our
number will grow before the time comes to face the threat of The Great Other. You need not do all of this alone, you will need allies and I am certain that the man I have seen is one of them.”

He shuddered at the mention of The Great Other. He always felt ill when he recalled his encounter with the malevolent entity and dreaded having to face it again.

He knew that she was speaking true about needing allies, but he was at a loss as to how he would acquire them. He knew Robb meant it when he said he would follow him, but Robb was also right about how the rest of the northern lords could react to the truth of Jon’s birth and that their liege lord had lied to them all these years.

‘Targaryens have little love in the North,’ He thought to himself sadly.

He felt more comfortable viewing himself as a Targaryen now, he knew that his uncle and cousin would never make him choose between being a Targaryen or a Stark. He was both, as far as he was concerned, and he would be the best of both – he owed it to the love he had been born from, the love that caused so much death and contention.

He would make it all right before his time in this world was over.

“Robb will have already returned from his visit to White Harbour by now,” He said to the Red Woman. “I do not know how it may have gone, though I doubt he would blurt the truth out then and there. The Manderlys are the richest House in the North and they would make powerful allies. I do not know how we will go about gathering allies from the South. Though, perhaps Sansa’s betrothed will back us given that he will be bound to the Starks when he weds Sansa.”

The familiar rush of protectiveness enveloped him at the thought of his sister marrying. Sansa may have chosen to keep him at a distance, but she was still his little sister and he would always wish for her to remain so.

‘If I am to be King one day, at least I will have the proper authority to ensure her husband is a good one. He’ll be a head shorter if not,’ He said to himself, allowing the smirk to fill his face.

“Your uncle in the capital is surely working to bring allies to your cause even as we speak,” Melisandre said to him. “It is not only the Lord who is acting to see you crowned and ready to face the threat. Your Old Gods are also playing their part. We will have allies before long, and then the truth of you will be made known and they will rally to their rightful King.”

“And what if they do not?” He asked, ashamed of the fear he was feeling at the thought of being rejected by the entire realm. “I will have to be a conqueror. Robert Baratheon will not give me the throne if I ask nicely, he will meet me with—”

“By the time your true identity is made known to the realm, Robert Baratheon will be dead.”

They both shot to their feet and turned in the direction of the new voice.

The man it belonged to was unlike any other he had seen. He was shorter than most men, not to the extent of Tyrion Lannister, but much shorter than Jon. His face looked kindly enough in the light of Melisandre’s Nightfire, and he wore a genuine smile and his posture was relaxed. He appeared to be alone and had only a small dagger strapped to his hip.

“Who are you?” Jon demanded, unable to suppress the image of his sword piercing his opponent’s face. “How did you—”

“It is him, my lord.” Melisandre said, her eyes resting on the small man before her. “The man I
saw in the fires.”

The short man’s smile grew as he heard Melisandre’s words, if he found them strange, he did not let it show. He nodded at the Red Woman before speaking.

“I have no experience with seeing visions in a fire, but I have my ways,” He said with a calm voice. He turned his eyes on Jon. “I saw that you would be here this night and decided it best to meet you here and lead you the rest of the way. You may be of the North, but my home is not an easy hall to reach for anyone outside of the Neck.”

He had a feeling he knew who this man was, but he decided to ask once again just to be sure.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Howland Reed, Jon.” The man answered. “I have been waiting many years to lay my own eyes upon you once more. Wake your friends and let us talk on the way, we are not far from my home, at least, not as far as you might think.” He laughed softly as he finished and fixed Melisandre with an expectant look.

“Very well, I shall wake them,” Melisandre said, looking awkward for the first time as she went over to their sleeping companions.

Jon did not take his eyes off of the man before him, he had been thinking of what he would say to the Crannogman when he met him; but as with Aemon all thought left him now that he was before him.

“You have so much of her in you,” Howland said, suddenly sounding saddened. “I suspect the greatest parts of her live on inside you, just as her eyes do. I did not know your father well, but he has not left you without any of his features.” He smiled warmly at Jon as he looked him up and down. “Lyanna would be proud of the man you have become, Jon.”

He could not help the tears that fell from his eyes upon hearing those words. He may never know her in this life but being told that she lived on in him was a comfort he never thought he could possibly have.

He looked forward to getting to know this mysterious man.

All his life he had been told that the Neck was a strong defence against invasion from the South.

Now that he had traversed through it, he could understand just why only dragons had conquered the North. Even with Lord Reed accompanying them and instructing them on where to step and when to be still, he could not supress the shot of fear he felt when he heard the ground squelch a little too loudly beneath his feet.

The journey to the Neck had taken no time at all, he knew that they were close but if he’d known they were this close then he would have pushed on instead of making camp.

Of their group, it was only Ghost who trotted on without a hint of fear. Sometimes he would even bound ahead of Lord Reed and Jon’s heart would tremble until he glimpsed his white coat once more.

Even Melisandre seemed afraid of the land they were walking through, it felt so different from the rest of the North – it was charged with a strangely familiar energy that he knew he felt before but could not think where. Maro and Garret had quickly recovered from their interrupted slumber the
first time Maro almost fell through the earth, at least, that is how it looked. Garret was quiet and stepped timidly wherever Lord Reed pointed, and Maro was quickly silenced with just a gesture from Lord Reed.

Despite the man saying they would talk on the way to his home, Lord Reed had yet to utter any words beyond instructions. He seemed intent on keeping a distance between himself and Jon, which he did not mind in that moment as he was their guide. Still, he could feel the excitement building within him at the thought of learning more of his mother.

“Here we are, my friends,” Lord Reed said, stopping suddenly at a spot that looked the same as everywhere else in the Neck. “We can go no farther on foot, I am afraid.”

If it had not been for Lord Reed pointing them out, he would have missed the small boats that were anchored to what appeared to be a natural dock. He jumped when the person who was clearly meant to guide the second boat spoke to Lord Reed.

‘It is as if they are extensions of the land around them,’ Jon thought to himself as he observed the two men. ‘I do not see how any force could get past them in this place.’

“Jon,” Lord Reed turned to him with a smile. “You and your quiet friend here will join me. The rest of your friends will be safe with Bainford, I assure you.”

“Very well, Lord Reed.” Jon answered as he followed the Crannogman into the boat. “How can you see all of this at night? I can scarcely make out one tree from another.” He gave a small chuckle to break the ice.

“Oh, we both know that is not true,” Lord Reed replied seriously, though the smile was still on his face. “The bond you share with your friend here,” He reached forward and patted Ghost on the head without a shred of hesitation. “Goes both ways. Just as you give him parts of yourself, so too does he.”

“What do you mean? How do you know—” Jon began.

“As I said, Jon, I have my ways,” Howland interrupted him, winking as he did so. “There is much I could tell you of some of the gifts you have been given, but it is not my place to do so. Let us finish the journey to my home in silence, my friend. Use the time and quiet to really notice the world around you.”

With that he turned his back on Jon and Ghost and started to pole the boat through the swamp; such was his skill that not once did it bump into a hidden tree root or any other such obstacle.

He looked at his wolf who was nestled against him, Jon knew the connection he shared with Ghost allowed him to experience the world through his senses, mostly when he slept, though he did not know how it worked. He never thought it would go both ways and he wondered what that could mean.

‘If I see the world through Ghost’s eyes, perhaps he can see it through mine?’ He mused, attempting to imagine the scenario. ‘What benefit would that give him? His own senses far outclass mine own.’

He focused intently on his wolf and it did not take long for the blood red eyes to meet his own. He willed himself to pull on the strange link that bonded them and sent his thoughts about what Lord Reed had said to Ghost.

The direwolf’s look seemed to intensify and he cocked his head to one side as if contemplating
what Jon had just sent to him. Jon did not break eye contact with his silent friend as the minutes passed.

It was when Ghost’s eyes closed that Jon’s mouth opened in a gasp.

As suddenly as the fever had come upon him, the world became more vibrant just as quickly. One second he could barely see or hear anything and the next it was as if he was seeing, hearing and feeling everything.

It was still as dark as night should be, but the reflection of the moon on the murky waters was brighter. The sounds on insects and other animals crawling through the vegetation or gliding through the waters were clearly audible, not only that, but he felt he could pinpoint their locations if he focused. The smells of the Neck were surprisingly good for a swamp, he caught the scent of many pleasant flowers and the like, but none matched that comforting scent that calmed him in the Godswood moons ago.

It was what he felt beyond they typical senses that was most prominent. He could feel whatever power it was that charged this place on his skin, it was neither cold nor hot. It simply was. The sensation of it was not unpleasant but it was a little unsettling, he could not place where he had felt such a thing before.

He was so preoccupied with how he was now experiencing the world around him that he did not notice the fatigue that had been creeping up on him until it was too strong to ignore. He allowed the connection to fade just enough for his senses to return to normal. Ghost did not even open his eyes, instead he placed his head on Jon’s lap and fell straight to sleep. The strain of sharing his senses was something he felt as much as Jon, it seemed.

“How did you know I could do that?” He asked Lord Reed. “Even I did not know, and we have never met—”

“Oh, we have met, Jon. You forget that I was there the day you were born.” Lord Reed turned to him with his warm smile. “Just because I have not laid eyes on you since, it does not mean I have not been watching. You yourself have spoken with the Gods, in a way I haven’t in years, does it really surprise you that a man can know more than he should? Even after all you have seen?”

“I—” Jon began to say but the words left him as he thought about Lord Reed’s words.

“There will be time enough for talking, Jon,” Lord Reed said after it became clear Jon was not going to answer. “Let’s get you settled in and then we can talk. But first, we should wait for your other friend, she will arrive soon, and I believe I know where she will land.”

Jon had not noticed the boat was no longer gliding through the murky waters. He would not have noticed the castle in front of him had it not been for Lord Reed’s gesture.

“Welcome to Greywater Watch, Jon.” He said proudly. “If I had had my way, this would have been your home all these years. Still,” He stepped out of the boat and turned once more to Jon. “What’s done is done and here you are. Bainford will see your companions to their quarters.” He nodded at the man who had just docked his boat behind them. “You, Ghost and I will wait for your winged friend.”

He should not have been surprised that the man knew about Nyx, but it was still so unsettling just how much he did know that he could not help himself.

“All in good time,” Lord Reed said as Jon opened his mouth. “Come now. I admit, I am excited
and terrified to meet a dragon in the flesh.”

“Where are we to meet her?” He asked, focusing on the tether that bound him to Nyx. “What if someone else sees her?”

Lord Reed turned to him once more with a reassuring smile.

“None who lay eyes on her here in the Neck will spread word of your dragon’s existence. Truth be told, we rarely leave the Neck at all. I haven’t since we returned to the North with you.” His voice became a little less cheerful as he said those words. “We will wait for her in the Godswood, Jon. Come.”

Lord Reed turned once more and so Jon and Ghost followed him.

‘How many more mysteries must I encounter before I get clear answers?’ He asked himself, suddenly aware of the frustration he felt. ‘It may not be his place to tell me of these supposed gifts, but he can tell me what I really want to know. My mother.’

He could not help but smile as he heard Nyx’s now familiar screech above them, glancing up, he could just make out her silhouette through the dense trees, only because her red and faded purple veins were glowing slightly.

‘Come, girl,’ He said to her through their connection. ‘Let’s see how Lord Reed reacts to seeing you with his own eyes for the first time.’

Nyx answered with another screech that he could have sworn sounded mischievous.

Chapter End Notes

So, Nyx and Ghost are both growing quickly and developing just as fast.
Now, Ghost will be larger than he is in canon in my story, but not as large as Fenris from Thor Ragnarok lol.
Nyx won't be a gigantic dragon in her first years of life, her development is not natural at this point in the story and I'm excited to explain the reasons for it in a later chapter!

Comments are always appreciated!
The Godswood in Winterfell was Jon’s favourite place in the whole world.

The feeling of tranquillity was one that he craved, especially when the weight of his bastard status grew too heavy to shoulder alone. In the Godswode he was never alone, the breezes and the rustle of the leaves comforted him like the words of the mother he longed to know.

It was in that Godswode that he learned his mother’s name and so much more. Even after it became the site where his life was continually upended, it remained his favourite place in the world.

The Godswode of Greywater Watch also gave off a feeling of serenity, but it felt more natural due to the lack of walls encircling it. The Heart Tree was not as large as the one in Winterfell and its face appeared to be one of contentment. It made Jon smile just to look at it and for a few moments he could believe that there was no reason for him to do anything but smile.

“I have been coming here everyday since I was a boy,” Lord Reed’s voice was low, being respectfully quiet in the sacred wood. “I have yet to get used to the feeling of peace this place brings me. I am fortunate my ancestors grafted their home onto it.”

“The one at Winterfell feels different to your own, Lord Reed.” Jon said quietly, following the Crannogman’s example. “Perhaps it is because castle walls enclose it, whereas your own is open to the environment?”

“That might be it, Jon,” Lord Reed replied. “Do you know who carved the faces into the Heart Trees?”

“Legends say the Children of the Forest did so, many thousands of years ago,” Jon answered.

“Yes,” Howland said with his familiar smile. “Though they did not simply carve a face into the bark and leave it there. They left a little of their magic to take root, and it manifested by providing whatever the ones who would come before it had need of. This one,” He gestured at the contented face on the white bark. “Gives peace and reassurance to those who come before it, life in the Neck is not without its hardships and even the most solitary among us can feel isolated at times. The one
in Winterfell, however, has housed the rulers of the North for millennia; it still provides peace and reassurance, but it does so to give one the clear head one needs to rule effectively."

Jon had never heard of such a thing before, but it did explain why this Heart Tree felt different to the one at Winterfell. He knew the moment he laid eyes on the Heart Tree for the first time that it was no ordinary tree, that it contained a power few could understand, but the way Lord Reed described it was something he had never imagined.

“How do you know all this?” He asked the Crannogman, fascinated by his knowledge of the Gods he had worshipped his whole life.

“I learned much during my time on the Isle of Faces, Jon,” Lord Reed replied. “I wish I could share some of it with you but, as I said before, it is not my place to do so.”

“Then whose place is it to tell—”

“The people who call that sacred isle their home,” Lord Reed cut across him. “Your journey will take you there once you are ready to leave this place. I know your life has been turned upside down and all you have been able to do is hold it together, I am sorry for that,” He sounded genuine. “But there is still much you must do, Jon.”

Jon gave no reply to the man, he knew it was not needed. He turned his gaze to the face of the Heart Tree, willing the feeling of contentment to wash over him.

The peaceful contemplation was broken by a loud screech over their heads.

Jon looked up calmly, but Lord Reed turned his head to the sky so fast he might have pulled a muscle in his neck.

Nyx was angling her body to make a landing, her pulsating veins glowing prominently in the night. The ground trembled slightly as she touched down, Nyx buckled a little on landing but quickly recovered and looked at Jon with what he knew, somehow, to be an expectant expression.

“Very good,” He said warmly, moving to pet his mythical friend. “Much better than the first time you made a landing, at least.” He laughed at the memory of Nyx’s clumsy first landing as she purred under his touch.

“By the Gods, I have seen her in my visions but to see her with my own eyes,” Lord Reed’s awed voice broke the moment as Nyx turned her head to the Crannogman.

She towered over Jon when she reared on her hind legs, but she was taller than Howland even on all four of them. She made no sound as she observed the stranger, but Jon could feel her tail begin to wrap around him just as it had when she met Robb and Catelyn.

He felt the same now as he did then at the gesture. All his life he longed for a protective embrace, hoping beyond hope that he would one day experience it from his mother but that was not to be. In a strange twist of fate, the first to embrace him in such a way was a dragon Jon hatched from a blaze he had set himself.

As before he placed a hand upon Nyx and spoke to her.

“This is Howland, Nyx,” He said soothingly, opening the connection between them so she knew he felt no fear of the man. “He’s a friend.”

She did loosen her grip on him but at least she did not screech at Lord Reed as she had done with
Robb and Catelyn. Jon looked at the man before him and he was impressed by his controlled expression.

“The Olds Gods have spoken to you?” He asked. “As they did with me?”

It took Lord Reed a few seconds to take his eyes off of Nyx before he answered Jon.

“In a way.” His voice was still a little shaky, but he did not sound afraid. “They show me that which is to be or has already been. Though I am left to decipher the meaning myself, much like your lady companion. I saw us here tonight. I saw you travel to the Isle of Faces and I saw you return to Winterfell afterwards.”

“Why must I go to the Isle of Faces?” He had no plans to leave the North, though he knew it would be inevitable. “I plan to wait until Lord Stark has returned with news of the situation in the capital.”

“And also, so that he might be the one to tell the lords of the North who you truly are?” Lord Reed asked knowingly. He continued before Jon could reply. “Jon, I cannot tell you more than I have been shown but I know it will be on the Isle of Faces that you will reunite with your uncle, or father, if you still think of him as such. Now, as for the situation in the capital, like I said when—”

“You said Robert Baratheon would be dead by the time I am known to the realm. Did you see this in some vision?”

He had not truly registered the man’s first words to him due to the shock of his sudden appearance, but now that he was thinking on them, he realised just how much they unsettled him.

He should not feel guilty for knowing that Robert Baratheon would be dead soon. After all, the man had rejoiced when the bodies of his siblings had been placed before him. He was a poor king, but he was also the best friend of the man who raised him.

‘Had things gone differently, he may have even been my father,’ The thought suddenly occurred to Jon as he recalled that Robert was also his mother’s intended.

He was not sure how he felt about that. He was still recovering from the shock of knowing that the Dragon Prince was his father. He pushed it all into the back of his mind as Ghost padded over to him and sat in the space between Jon’s body and Nyx’s own.

“I have seen Ned and a knight of the Kingsguard before Robert on his deathbed. It was only a glimpse before the rest of the visions were made known to me, however,” Doubt entered his voice for the first time. “I have yet to divine the meaning of what I was shown.”

“Will you tell me what you’ve seen?” Jon asked.

He was certain the man would refuse, that he would insist it a sacred thing between the Old Gods and himself – he was surprised that Lord Reed began to tell him the things he had seen without preamble.

“I saw a stag being torn apart from the inside, a lion emerged from the broken corpse and began to claw at a dragon’s skull to little avail. After that I saw the sea for but a moment before I was surrounded by fire, in those flames was a woman and three stones. As the vision faded, three screeches rent the air and that was when I saw you and Ned on the Isle of Faces with your wolf.” He stopped to clear his throat. “Finally, I saw the Wall and the men of the Night’s Watch atop it, looking out in horror at the oncoming storm. I could make out countless blue stars in the storm before I returned to myself.”
Jon had thought he would be able to help the man make sense of what he had seen, but he was wrong. He could scarcely follow the train of thought going through his mind.

“I hoped to help you discern what it is the Gods wished you to know, my lord,” He said to the silent man. “I am sorry, but I do not think I can do so. What are your thoughts on all you have been shown?”

“You need not apologise, Jon. The Gods have tasked you with much already, you need not take on my burdens as well, but thank you,” He pursed his lips in concentration before answering Jon’s question. “The only thing I can be certain of is that the storm coming from Beyond the Wall is the Night King and his army. The woman in the flames, well, I believe she was your aunt, Daenerys Targaryen and those stones were in fact dragon eggs,” He looked at Jon, awaiting his response.

He was not sure what to think. His thoughts often travelled to the aunt and uncle across the Narrow Sea, but he knew it was not safe for them to return to Westeros and even then, why would they believe he is their nephew? Would his uncle wish him dead because his own claim to the Iron Throne would be inferior to Jon’s?

“You say three screeches rent the air as the visions changed? Did they sound like Nyx?” He patted the tail that was still wrapped loosely around him, she chirped when he said her name and nuzzled him with the side of her nose. “Perhaps you were seeing her hatch three dragons?”

“They sounded alike, yes,” Lord Reed nodded slowly in thought. “If she is to hatch dragons then perhaps the Gods of that land are working to prepare her for her own role in the war to come? After all, the sea will not protect Essos for long if Westeros falls. Have you thought of contacting her at all?”

“Yes,” Jon answered immediately. “All the more since I met with Aemon, I wish to know my family. Only I—”

“You are worried that she will not accept you?” Howland asked. “It is a possibility, but from what I understand the blood of the Dragonlords calls to itself unlike any other. Perhaps that will be enough for her to know that you are who you say?”

He was not sure what to think of that, but he remembered the feeling of power that radiated from Aemon and thought perhaps that was what Lord Reed meant.

“Even if she accepts me, I do not think my uncle will take kindly to one with a stronger claim to the throne.” He said regretfully. “He will see me as just another usurper.”

“Jon,” Lord Reed said hesitantly. “I thought you would have heard, but I see now you do not know. Viserys Targaryen is dead, Jon.”

He felt his stomach sink a little as he heard the words. The man was a stranger to him, but he was his blood. Just as much as Benjen was. He mourned for yet another member of his family he would never know.

“Well, at least we know Daenerys will be safe enough with three dragons,” He said in an attempt to move their talk away from the news. “Why do you think I must go to the Isle of Faces?”

“In all the time man has walked this world, there has never been one such as yourself. The raw power in your veins is evident to me, as it would be to any who is touched by magic. Understand this, Jon,” Lord Reed’s voice was serious. “Power always comes with a cost. The balance must always be maintained, and I suspect that that applies more forcefully to you than it does any other
who can access the energies of the world.”

“I do not understand what—”

“You will when you speak with those on the isle, Jon, I can give you no more answers on this subject. However,” Lord Reed attempted a reassuring smile. “I do have answers to questions about your birth. Your uncle insisted we destroy them, but they are yours. Let us retire to my study and I will give them to you. I will leave you to settle this one,” He waved at Nyx. “She will be safe here, I promise you.”

Lord Reed walked off and so Jon nudged Nyx to get her to release her hold on him.

“Try not to burn the woods down, please?” He jokingly asked her as she turned to face him fully. She chirped once more before lowering her head to nuzzle his chest. “This place looks comfortable enough for you, eh?”

She pushed him gently, which he knew was how she displayed affection for him, before she turned away from Jon and Ghost and padded over to the Heart Tree.

She looked at the face of the tree for a few seconds before huffing and then proceeded to coil her body around the tree.

He was just thinking of how endearing the sight looked when his breath hitched.

The glowing red and fading purple veins along her body shone a little brighter and he felt, rather than heard, a hum in the air emanating from the tree that matched the pulses of Nyx’s veins.

‘Yet more questions to ask when I reach the isle, it seems.’ He said to himself as he and Ghost left the Godswood and the now sleeping dragon.

*  

The interior of Greywater Watch was comfortable and inviting. A strong contrast to the almost inhospitable land it was built upon.

As he was following Lord Reed to his study, he suddenly remembered something the man had said to him.

“You said this would have been my home if my uncle had agreed. Why did he not agree to it?”

Lord Reed did not reply immediately but he did slow his pace as he thought on Jon’s words.

“He had just lost his little sister, Jon. After losing his father and brother and his innocence to war,” Lord Reed’s voice was solemn. “You are all that is left of Lyanna. Yes, there are those who have memories of her, and I am told that Ned’s youngest daughter is shaping up to be just like Lya,” He laughed fondly before continuing. “Jon, if I had raised you here as I was prepared to do, I would not have hidden the truth from you as Ned chose to. I cannot say if I would have been right not to do so, and I do not judge your uncle for doing so, either.”

“If I had been raised here, I never would have had to deal with Lady Catelyn’s hatred for me just because I was—”

“Consider her position, Jon. She believed for years she would marry your uncle Brandon and bear his children. She had to marry his younger brother and not only bear his children but also allow his supposed bastard to be raised alongside them. She is of the South, Jon. If you feel you have been
mistreated for your status here in the North, you will see just how little we care for bastards compared to our southern counterparts. We are here.” He stopped and opened a door and led him into a room that looked too comfortable to be a study.

There was no desk, just a small round table that was surrounded by an assortment of mismatched chairs. The fireplace warmed the room and added to the feeling of relaxation that washed over Jon despite Lord Reed’s words.

He would think more on what Howland said later, for now that he was here, he wanted to talk of his reason for travelling all this way.

“I intend to announce my true identity to the realm and claim the Iron Throne,” Jon said as the Crannogman was bent over a large chest in the corner. “I will need the proof of my birth for that and I—”

“You would also like to know that your father did not abandon Elia and your siblings, that she truly was agreeable to the situation and not a helpless woman?” Lord Reed asked without looking at him. He stood and Jon saw the stack of letters and parchment that he had gathered in his hands. “I hope that it will not anger you to know that I have read these for myself, I can confirm that Elia knew all that happened and bore no ill will for Lyanna and any resulting children. In fact, you will be quite surprised to know just how she felt about it all. Here.”

He handed all of the documents to Jon and he felt a sense of excitement course through him as he began to unfurl the parchment on top, but Lord Reed stopped him before he could do so.

“Forgive me, Jon,” He said kindly. “You will only be able to stay here this one night, and I would rather we talk whilst we have the opportunity.”

“Why? Do not think me ungrateful for even a single night of your hospitality but I would have thought—”

“Time is not something we have in abundance I am afraid. Your uncle will soon leave the capital to meet with you in the Riverlands,” Lord Reed said over him. “If you are to arrive there in time, you will need to leave tomorrow.”

“How long will it take to get there? I have Nyx and will have to travel mostly at night and through whatever woodland there is.”

“You are fortunate then, there is plenty in the Riverlands, however, you will not need to worry about your dragon being seen. As long as you are alone at night, she will know to remain hidden.”

Jon did not bother to ask how he knew that, and he was certain Lord Reed was correct. Not once had Nyx joined him during the day when they had no cover ever since he told her not to.

“But will she do the same if I am farther away from her than I have ever been?” He worried in his mind before speaking with Lord Reed again.

“I understand, I will ensure my companions are ready to leave in the morning.”

“Do not look so unhappy, Jon,” Howland chuckled. “You will be welcome to stay as long as you like when time permits. Now, perhaps you could read those letters in your room after we have finished speaking? There are things I can tell of Lya that those letters cannot.”

That got Jon’s full attention, he wanted to know all he could of the woman who died bringing him into this world. Anything to feel a connection to her.
He thought of the still unopened letter he carried with him, he wanted so badly to read it, but the timing did not feel right. He suspected he would know when the time was right to read his mother’s words to him.

“Of course, my lord,” Jon smiled, placing the stack of letters on the table before him and sitting back in his chair.

It was hours later when Lord Reed had finally finished speaking of Lyanna Stark.

His mother was The Knight of the Laughing Tree. The man before him was essentially her squire. She was unrivalled on horseback and would not turn away from those in need. The story of how she met Howland had made Jon angry at his abusers, his anger faded when Howland said the look of anger on Jon’s face matched that of Lyanna’s that day.

“Perhaps it is best if we retire, Jon,” Lord Reed said after a particularly large yawn.

“Yes, my lord,” Jon said, attempting to stifle one of his own. “I am thankful that I will get to spend the night in a bed.”

“Be sure to savour it, Jon.” The Crannogman said with a smirk. “Though I have a few tents I could offer you and your companions, if you would like them?”

“They would certainly be welcome, Lord Reed,” Jon said gratefully. “I did not think to ask Lady Catelyn for them when I sent Melisandre to Winterfell. We did not intend to be this long on the road.”

“I will ensure they are packed and ready for your departure tomorrow, then.” Lord Reed said as he opened his study door. “I will show you to your room.”

Jon followed him through the halls and his opinion of the place continued to be one of positivity. He would have been fortunate to grow up here, but Winterfell was his home. It always will be.

“Here we are,” Howland said, stopping at a door. “I will leave you to prepare for sleep. Goodnight, Jon.”

“Goodnight, my lord. Thank you for telling me of, well, thank you.” He said, unable to put his appreciation for the man’s stories into words.

“You are most welcome, my friend. Please, call me Howland.”

"Howland,” Jon agreed, nodding before turning into the room. He was about to close the door when Lord Reed peered into the room.

“Jon, be sure to shave, my boy. It’s shaping up to be a mighty fine beard, but I suspect you’ll want to look your best on your way to the Isle of Faces. Trust me,” He winked and shut the door before Jon could ask what he meant.

‘What a confusing man,’ He thought to himself as he spotted the razor and basin on the table next to his bed. ‘Perhaps a shave is needed, given that I have been travelling for months.’ He rubbed the growing hair on his face, suddenly finding it irritating.

He was at a loss as to who he might need to look his best for, especially whilst travelling to a mysterious isle, but all thought left him as his body sank into the mattress and he let out a contended sigh.
As sleep claimed him almost immediately, his last few waking moments were filled with images of a woman who he imagined would look like an adult Arya racing through the North on horseback, he smiled as he slipped into the strange realm of dreams.

Thankfully, his visit here was not to be filled with horrors and his worst fears.

The moment he crossed the Neck and entered the lands of the South, Jon felt a change come upon him. It was as if a storm was raging inside of him. The fevers were more violent and more frequent, and Ghost’s presence did little to balance them out. At times he felt as if he were ablaze and others as if he had slept naked atop the Wall.

He had spent two whole days in his furs within one of the tents given to them by Lord Reed. He wondered if this was how he felt when sickness almost claimed him as a child, he could not imagine his young constitution being strong enough to survive such a thing.

He knew this was no ordinary ailment, but he was not certain as to why it suddenly felt worse now that he was in the South.

‘I was born in the South, the deep South,’ He thought to himself as he shivered. ‘Why would the land beneath my feet affect me in such a way?’

Melisandre had no answers for him, she even suggested that they turn back, but Jon knew they needed to press on.

He had just risen from his furs after a night of fitful sleep when the Red Priestess entered his tent. He scrambled to cover his naked torso, but he was too weak to complain about her unannounced entrance.

“My lord,” She said, showing no interest in his half-nakedness. “I believe the Lord has shown me a way for you to ease the symptoms you have been experiencing.”

“What is it?” He asked desperately, all thoughts of modesty forgotten. “Some potion or ritual?”

“Nothing like that, my lord. I saw you engulfed once more in that strange white fire.”

That gave Jon pause. He knew he could summon those white flames, even in his weakened state he felt sure he could bring them into the world. He had not done it since that night with Robb and Catelyn and that had only been a single hand and he spent every second of it in fear of the pain he was certain would begin any moment.

He did not want to think about how it would feel if he should attempt to light up his entire body and discover he was not wholly immune to whatever it was he was creating.

‘I do not see what other choice I have, though,’ He thought to himself.

“Very well,” He sighed, trying to sound braver than he felt. “I do not think I will be able to continue if something is not done about this—” He could not think of the right word to describe his condition.

“It will not harm you,” Melisandre said firmly, as if she knew his fears. “Those flames saved you from the Great Other, they birthed your dragon and you summoned them before your aunt and cousin without effort. They are yours, my lord.”
He wished he felt reassured, but he didn’t. Nevertheless, he exited the tent and was thankful that Maro and Garret were still abed. Melisandre once more taking the watch on her own.

He felt foolish as he stood there almost naked, preparing himself for what he was about to do. He looked around the area they had made their camp in and was certain there was no one around to see what he was about to attempt. Nyx had not returned to him last night, but he hoped he would see her this night.

He took a deep breath and focused his mind. He envisioned those pure white flames in the void as he did that night with Robb and Catelyn, as he felt the tugging sensation in the centre of his forehead, he imagined pulling them from the void and into the world. He focused on his entire body instead of a single hand and after a few seconds he knew it had worked.

He felt his fear almost cripple him as he registered the warmth of the flames, he kept his eyes open, but he could see nothing but the flames that were engulfing him.

He was the little amount of clothing he wore was burning away but just as he began to truly fear that he would burn to death, the flames lost all their warmth.

He felt charged with energy, all traces of whatever it was that ailed him were gone. He once more pictured the void in his mind and willed the flames to return there. It was as they were receding that he thought he saw himself in the void, but it was quickly gone as the last of the flames died out and he blinked to clear his eyes.

He only just noticed he was out of breath, he felt as if he had been running for miles, but he still felt as if he could continue for more. The world appeared dull in colour as his eyes adjusted.

“How do you feel?” Melisandre asked, stepping forward with a look of concern upon her face. “Did it work?”

He scanned his body before answering, finding no trace of weakness or fever in his limbs or chest.

“I think so, I feel normal, well,” He cleared his throat. “As normal as one could feel after being on fire,” He made a halfhearted attempt to chuckle. "My lord," Melisandre said slowly. "You were not on fire. Your eyes were white as they had been the night your dragon hatched, but other than that there was nothing."

How could that be? He felt the flames on his skin, they were warm for the first time. Had he simply hallucinated them? He couldn't have, Melisandre had said his eyes had turned white.

"I do not understand any of this.” He hated how little he knew of himself. He learned more of his mother, but it seemed the cost of that would be having his identity stripped away each day.

"You will have your answers soon, my lord.” Melisandre said with sympathy. "The Lord has shown me this Isle of Faces in the flames, we will have the truth there, I know it. Now, perhaps it is best if we prepare to depart? We may as well take advantage of the strength you have now, should the fever return.”

It had been almost two weeks since Jon had set himself a blaze. The fever had returned but it was nowhere near as intense. Jon practiced pulling small amounts of the white fire from the void, but it felt less effective each time he did it.
Today, they were making good progress towards the God’s Eye. He had not seen much in the way of castles and villages, having been led through the Neck by Lord Reed so that he could avoid crossing the Twins. He only knew the Freys by reputation, but he did not want any word of his travels to be made known.

They kept a steady pace. They had no need of a cart since between Ghost and Garret they had plenty of game to eat each night. The few travellers they encountered on the road had not troubled them once they laid eyes on Ghost, but his direwolf ignored them as if they were not there.

His friend seemed to enjoy being in the Riverlands, more than once he had raced off for an hour or two and returned with his mouth bloody from a kill. He did not have a good opinion of the rivers, however, after Jon attempted to bathe him and clean his muddy fur – he sulked for the rest of that night and sprawled out in the tent he shared with Jon a little more than usual.

He had been practicing the strange ability he had to experience the world with Ghost’s senses amplifying his own. He was careful not to do it too often lest he be struck down by some magical malady, but his connection with Ghost brought no pain or fear to him. It tired both of them, however, so he was certain to not overdo it.

He had been experiencing the lush environment he found himself in with his amplified senses when he caught it.

It was that scent that had been carried to him on a gentle breeze that day in the Godswood. It was as comforting and as wonderful as it had been that day. This time, however, he could detect the direction it was coming from.

He pulled himself out of the shared sense and looked at his direwolf. Ghost was peering up at him on his horse with his tail wagging wildly, Jon knew he too had caught the scent.

“Go on, boy. Let us see what it is.” He said eagerly to the wolf.

Ghost shot off without preamble and Jon spurred his horse to follow him, feeling slightly crazed as he galloped after the white blur that was Ghost.

“My lord!” He heard Melisandre and Garret shout behind him.

“What the fuck are you going?” Maro yelled, ever annoyed.

He ignored them all, he was focused on following Ghost as if he were on the hunt in his wolf’s body.

Ghost slowed as they approached a procession of carriages on the road. It was too late for the riders at the front of procession to not notice him, however.

“What in seven hells is that?” One roared as Ghost halted before them.

“It’s huge! What is it?” Exclaimed another.

“Archer! Get it before—”

That caused Jon to find his tongue.

“Stop!” He roared as he kicked his horse into a sprint. “He will not harm you!”

The men took no notice of him and his heart stopped as he heard the sound of a bowstring being
He could not follow the arrow as it shot towards Ghost, but he steeled himself for the sound of it hitting home.

Faster than he would have thought possible, Ghost leapt out of the arrow’s path and stood low to the ground with his teeth bared, ready to pounce.

“Stop!” Jon yelled once more as he jumped from his horse and stood in front of Ghost.

He placed a hand upon his wolf’s head, but for the first time ever the wolf ignored his silent command to calm down. He shifted his body so that it was in front of Jon, but he made no move to attack the men on their horses.

“Get away from it, you fool!” The archer yelled as he nocked another arrow.

“He is mine!” Jon said desperately. “He will not harm you, just put the—"

“And what is going on here?” A woman’s voice cut across him sharply.

He turned in the direction of the voice and his eyebrows shot up as he saw the apparent speaker. Two of the largest men he had ever seen were striding towards them, their shoulders almost touching. Just as Jon was about to answer them, they parted and revealed the true speaker. He felt silly, assuming it was one of the large twins who had spoken.

“Well?” The woman demanded. “Are we being attacked? If so, it would shake things up nicely, but I was about to retire for an afternoon—" Her voice stopped as she laid eyes on Jon and Ghost. Her eyes bugged as she focused on the direwolf. “What are you waiting for? Shoot it!” She commanded the archer.

“No!” Jon forced Ghost behind him, but it was in vain as the wolf refused to stay there. “My lady, he will not harm you or your men. He is mine.”

“Yours? That’s a beast, boy,” The old woman had recovered her sharp tone quickly. “Beasts do not make good pets. Now, stand aside or we will see just how accurate my man is with his bow. I assure you; he is no expert marksman.”

Jon fought the strange desire to laugh as the woman said those words, it was harder to not do so when he saw the archer reddened in response.

“Grandmother, what is going on?” A male voice spoke, coming from the same direction as the old woman and her guards.

“A beast, Willas.” The woman replied without looking at the man who had just entered Jon’s peripherals.

“My lord, I assure you this is no—” Jon began, not taking his eyes off of the archer and his taught bow.

“Is that—” The man said before breaking off. “Is that a direwolf? Truly?”

“Yes, my lord,” Jon said, seizing on the man’s curiosity. “He is mine. He will not attack anyone, I swear it, my lord.”

Ghost was not helping the situation at all, instead of relaxing into a stance that gave merit to Jon’s released.
words, he only sank lower and kept his teeth bared. Jon would have soiled himself in fear if he had been met with the sight, and he was sure a few of the men around him would also.

“Stand down!” The lord commanded the men. “If the wolf has not harmed this man, then perhaps his words are true.”

“You buffoon, you think a direwolf is—” The woman began angrily.

“I know animals, grandmother,” The man said, looking at Ghost with open curiosity. “If an animal can recognise one man as friend, it is likely they can do the same for others.”

The old woman huffed but the guards reluctantly stood down. Jon still kept his attention between the archer and the man before him.

“Ghost,” Jon said, opening the connection between them as much as possible. “At ease, boy. We’re safe.”

It took a few moments, but eventually the direwolf relaxed. He stood by Jon’s side as he observed the men before him. Jon could feel his muscles ready to spring at a moment’s notice, so he attempted to ease the tension.

“I am sorry for him startling you, my lord,” Jon said to the man. “He caught scent of something and sprinted after it. He—”

“My lord!”

He turned and saw his three companions racing towards him. Maro and Garret had jumped off their horses and closed the distance between them.

“What’s this then?” Maro demanded as his eyes swept the scene before them.

“A misunderstanding, there is no need for it to get any worse.” Jon said firmly. “Stand down, Garret.” He ordered the man who had his hand on the hilt of the sword at his hip.

He turned back to the lord and lady and that was when he spotted the banners.

‘A golden rose,’ He thought, racking his brain for the House it represents. ‘The Tyrells!’

This must be the party travelling to Winterfell with Sansa’s intended.

“Forgive me, my lord, but are you bound for Winterfell?”

“And what business is—” The woman began before once more being cut off.

“Yes.” He looked suspicious for the first time. “How do you know this? Who are you?”

"If you speak over me one more time, I'll feed you to that beast myself." The old woman snapped at her grandson before turning to Jon. "Well? Who are you?"

“My name is Jon Snow, my lady. I believe you are travelling there to meet with my sister, Sansa Stark.”

The woman’s eyes were wide once more and the man looked surprised as well. They looked at each other before returning their gaze back to Jon.

“And how do I know this is true, Jon?” He asked. “What brings you so far from Winterfell? We
received no word of a party meeting us and you are clearly not here to do that.”

“I am to meet with my father, my lord.” He answered honestly. “I suspect we will be returning to Winterfell after that. I assume you are Lord Willas Tyrell, my sister’s intended?”

He pushed all feelings of overprotectiveness out of his mind as the man nodded in confirmation.

“I am. This is my grandmother, Lady Olenna. Now, perhaps you will—”

“There you both are,” A new voice joined them, this one instantly catching Jon’s attention. He felt Ghost tense up even more next to him. “I went to check on Senna and Flynn and returned to find you both gone. What is, oh—” Her gasp matched Jon’s own, thankfully covering it up as she came into view.

The rest of the people faded into the background as the woman entered his sight.

She was easily the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He was glad Lord Willas had decided to answer the woman, as Jon’s tongue seemed to have left his mouth.

“This man claims to be Sansa Stark’s bastard brother, Marge,” He said without care for Jon hearing. “The wolf is safe, he claims, but perhaps you should—”

"It is Jon, isn’t it?” The woman, Marge, asked him. "Jon Snow?” He felt a rush of excitement upon hearing she knew of him, but it was quickly halted when he noticed the look of suspicion on her own face.

He nodded, fearing his voice would only humiliate him should he try to use it.

“Well met, Jon. I am Margaery.” She said with a breathtakingly beautiful smile, he could not tell if it was genuine or not, but appreciated seeing it all the same. “And what is your name?” She asked Ghost as she directed the smile at his direwolf.
MARGAERY VI

Her grandmother had their procession stop frequently so that she might have a short sleep without the motion of her carriage disturbing her. During these stops, Margaery would spend her time with Senna and little Flynn, who shared a carriage at the back of the procession.

In truth, they did not need so many carriages to accompany them, but father insisted that they be well-provisioned during their visit to the North. She knew that this really meant he wanted to show off the wealth of Highgarden, no doubt her grandmother was the origin of this tactic.

Senna agreed to come and work for her, in a capacity Margaery had yet to determine. Truthfully, she wanted the woman and her babe out of King’s Landing, and she was glad she agreed to accompany her when news reached them of the King’s death.

She offered a silent thanks to the Seven when she learned that the King declined her father’s offer of her hand to Joffrey. She tried to see any redeeming qualities in the crown prince, but there were none to be found. He showed respect to Margaery in his own way, but the same could not be said for her brother, Willas. He all but called him a cripple during the meal he shared with the Tyrells.

She hated to think of how the people would suffer under the rule of the foul King she knew he would be, but she took solace in the fact that Senna would lead a better life with her.

However, they had yet to hear of the announcement of Joffrey’s ascension to the throne and it had been almost two weeks since news reached them of the King’s death.

She returned to the carriage she had left Willas in, intending to tease him further about meeting his bride-to-be, only he was not there.

The guard told her that he was at the front of the procession with her grandmother, investigating some commotion. Curiosity found her feet carrying her to the front before she was aware of moving them herself, it was boring on the road and perhaps this would provide some much needed entertainment.

She had not been expecting the sight that greeted her.

Left and Right, her grandmother’s guards were standing so close to Olenna they were almost touching her. The guards around them seemed tense but she saw them relax when her brother’s voice ordered them to. She heard an unknown voice speaking to her brother and grandmother, his tone suggesting he was in some form of distress.

It was as she made her presence known and stood beside her brother that she saw them for the first time.

She wanted to scream and flee upon seeing the white beast. It was larger than any hound she had ever seen, in truth it looked more like a wolf than a dog. Years of self-control and learning kept her from making a fool of herself, but she was surprised that the men had agreed to stand down despite the clear threat before them.

The red eyes were the most unsettling thing about the beast. It was beautiful in a strange way; the pristine white fur was not something she had ever seen on an animal before, but the eyes were blood red and currently fixed on her, as were the eyes of the man it was standing protectively in front of.
The first thing she noticed was his eyes as well. They were so startlingly grey they were almost as black as the curls on his head. His face was handsome, almost beautiful in fact, and his build was slender in the way that suggested a lean but muscular frame.

When Willas introduced him as Sansa Stark’s bastard brother, she could not help the sudden suspicion she felt.

‘His clothes are in a sorry state,’ She thought to herself as she took in his appearance once more. ‘Surely Lord Stark would ensure he is well-provided for in that regard. Unless he has been travelling for a long time.’ She reasoned before arriving at the thought that caused her to mistrust the man the most. ‘Lord Stark said he resembled his mother, but he has the same Stark looks as he does.’

She decided to speak to the man directly, recalling the name Lord Stark had given him. He only nodded in response to her question, so she introduced herself with her most disarming smile in an attempt to put him at ease. She felt addressing the wolf would be a nice touch.

She had not been expecting the wolf to answer her question, but it seemed the beast would find its voice before its master did. She had to suppress a giggle when she saw his mouth moving wordlessly, he looked flustered and it made for a strangely endearing image.

One of his companions was not as schooled as Margaery, he snorted in clear amusement when he noticed the look on the man who claimed to be Jon Snow's face.

It seemed to be enough to shake the man out of whatever trance he was in. He glared at the companion who snorted before turning to answer Margaery's question.

"This is Ghost, my lady," He said quietly as he patted the wolf on its large head. It almost looked like an overgrown puppy as she noticed its tail wag.

"Hello, Ghost," She beamed at the unsettling beast, ignoring the looks of her grandmother and brother and focusing on the pair before them. "For what reason are you so far from home, Jon?"

"He claims to be meeting with his father, but Lord Stark is still in the capital," Her brother answered before Jon could. "Though why he would leave so soon after the King’s death is—"

"The King is dead?" Jon cut across her brother.

"Yes," Willas answered, hiding his obvious annoyance at being interrupted quite well. "Almost a fortnight ago. How do you not know this? Your father is supposedly the Hand of the King."

"He has agreed to serve Joffrey as Hand?" The man asked, ignoring her brother's own question.

"There has been no word of Joffrey's ascension yet. Now," Her grandmother's stern voice was directed at the man. "How does the bastard son of the Hand of the King not know these things? Word was sent to the entirety of the Seven Kingdoms."

"I have been travelling for quite some time, my lady," The man answered her, he looked at the red haired woman at his side briefly before turning back to the Tyrells. "I apologise once more for the disturbance my friends and I have caused. I will be on my way now. I am certain Sansa is most eager to meet you, my lord."

Without further ado he turned to mount his horse, but her grandmother's voice halted him.

“Bastards do not turn their backs on lords and ladies in the South, boy,” Her sharp voice was in full
force. “You will leave when you are dismissed and not a moment—”

The man’s demeanour had changed so drastically it was as if another person was before them.

All traces of his previous awkwardness were gone, he projected an image of confidence and the glare he was aiming at her grandmother was almost as wolf-like as that of his snowy companion.

“Forgive my lack of decorum, Lady Olenna. As I said, I have been on the road for quite some time.” His voice was firm but not harsh. “My father will be waiting for me, and his commands supersede your own. So, I will be on my way.”

Margaery glanced at her grandmother and saw that the shock was quickly turning into outrage. She quickly interceded before the situation could turn sour.

“Grandmother,” She said sweetly. “If he is indeed Lord Stark’s son, we should treat him with respect given that Willas will soon be his goodbrother.” She turned her smile to Jon Snow and a sudden thought occurred to her. “Perhaps you could tell us more of my brother’s intended? I am certain her dark hair will only add to the beauty she is surely growing into.”

She knew Lord Stark had said his eldest daughter resembled her mother, that her hair was Tully red, but does this man know that?

“It is Arya who has the dark hair of the Starks, my lady,” He answered her with a smirk that told her he saw through her attempt. “Sansa takes after her mother in appearance, as do the rest of my siblings besides Arya.”

“And you, Jon?” She asked, deciding to get to the reason for her suspicions. “Lord Stark told me you favour your own mother, but you look so much like Lord Stark that it gives me pause.”

Something in the back of her mind was tugging at her, but she ignored it as she focused on the man before her. His expression had not changed exactly, but her question had rattled him.

“I have never met my mother, so I cannot say as to whether or not I resemble her.” He answered with clear emotion. “You do not believe I am who I say, I understand. You will believe me when I return to Winterfell with Lord Stark. Now, I must be on my way.”

“Do not presume to—” Olenna began.

“Well, if we are to be related through marriage then perhaps you could join us for some refreshments?” Margaery quickly asked over her grandmother. “I am certain my brother would be eager to hear more of his intended.”

The man gave no reply, instead he walked over to the woman and spoke with her, their words were too low for Margaery to hear and so her grandmother took the opportunity to speak to her.

“What do you think you are doing, girl?” She demanded. “Even if he is Stark’s bastard, he is still a bastard and should not dine with—”

“Grandmother, Lord Stark raised him among his own children. Surely that makes it clear to you how important Jon is to him. Also,” She gave her grandmother a knowing smile. “If he is truly of the North, then he will take the inferred Guest Right seriously and perhaps he will feel safe enough to give us information to best serve us in Winterfell.”

Her grandmother did not look appeased, but she had a glint of pride in her eyes as she looked up at Margaery.
“Very well, but if the boy has none of his father’s table manners then—”

“I thank you for your offer of refreshments,” Jon said suddenly. “I accept.”

She gave him her most brilliant smile as she tentatively stepped forward, ignoring the protests of her brother and grandmother. She regretted her bold move almost immediately as she realised just how large the wolf truly was.

She stopped and looked at Jon, raising an eyebrow to ask the obvious.

Jon only smiled and look at his beast, who met his gaze and almost immediately fell to his haunches.

The wolf must be particularly well trained to respond to such subtle commands. It boded well for what she was about to do.

She closed the distance between them with as much speed as caution allowed, she reached out a trembling hand and stopped a few inches shy of touching the wolf.

She waited on bated breath for the wolf’s reaction, dreading that it would bite her hand off. She could not suppress the giggle that escaped her when the wolf closed the distance itself and pressed its wet nose into her palm.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ghost,” She said as sweetly as she could despite the tremble in her voice. “Shall we find you something eat as well?”

The wolf only panted and wagged its tail in response. She turned her attention to the man she had only realised was almost touching her.

He was looking at her with wide eyes, but there was none of the usual lust or suspicion in them. Instead there was only what she assumed to be wonder.

‘At least he is not wholly immune to a woman’s charm,’ She thought to herself, filing it away in her mind for later.

She offered her arm to the stranger, it felt as natural as breathing, but she knew the looks she must be receiving from her family and their guardsmen.

“Come, we will all find a comfortable spot to eat and get to know each other a little better,” She said as she widened her smile.

Jon gave one of his own and she was surprised at how it lit up his entire face, casting him in a new light. She was even more surprised when he took her arm and sent a shock through her body, she could feel her skin tingle at the point of contact.

Without letting her surprise show, she led Jon over to her family. She was excited to know more about the man, remembering that strange desire to know of him when Lord Stark first spoke of him.

It did not take the servants long to arrange an impressive spread for their surprise guests. Barely fifteen minutes had passed before they were all seated at the table they usually dined on during their travels. It was not often used as grandmother preferred to take her meals in the privacy of her own carriage.
She was sitting between her grandmother and brother, directly opposite the red haired woman. She was not sure what to make of the lady accompanying Jon. Her hair was the most brilliant shade of red she had ever seen, as were her robes but it was the eyes that unnerved her a little. She had never met anyone with red eyes before.

‘Well, at least until today,’ She thought to herself as she watched the wolf – direwolf – devour the mutton chops the servants had brought for him.

Jon was sitting to the left of his female companion, directly opposite her brother. The man who laughed at Jon, Maro, was seated at one of end of the table on her grandmother’s side and the other, Garret, was across from him at the other end.

She deduced that Jon was the leader of this strange assortment of people, which was not an unreasonable assumption as she noticed they all seemed to wait for Jon’s leave to act; particularly the one named Garret, he looked at Jon with the same kind of fervour as the Red Woman did.

“Might I ask your name, my lady?” Her brother asked the Red Woman politely.

“I am Melisandre, Lord Willas.” The woman’s voice was strange, her subtle accent was not one she was familiar with.

“A pleasure to meet you, my lady. Would I be correct in assuming you are a priestess of the Lord of Light?” Her brother asked.

She was not at all surprised that Willas knew of some foreign god, he spent most of his time with his nose buried in one book or another. She had only heard rumours of this deity and they were not pleasant rumours at that.

Looking at her, Melisandre did not seem the kind of woman to commit horrors such as sacrificing men to the flames and other such legends but looks were not always a clear indicator of a person’s true character. That was one of the lessons her grandmother ensured she learned well.

“You are correct, my lord.” The woman smiled at her brother and she could not deny she was a beauty. “Have you had dealings with members of my faith?”

“Not really, my lady, I do read quite a bit,” Her brother smiled. “I have met a Red Priest before, Thoros of Myr, he was a part of Robert’s court. Do you know of him?”

Melisandre hesitated a little before answering.

“I do, my lord. He was sent here to show King Robert the ways of the Lord of Light, however,” Her tone became one of disapproval. “I have only heard reports that he found himself a drinking companion in the King.”

Grandmother laughed at that, as did Maro as he helped himself to the wine the servants had left for them.

“Are you here on the same mission, Lady Melisandre?” Margaery asked. “To spread the word of your god to those who would hear it?”

She herself was devoted to the Seven, not to the point of zealotry but she was proud of her faith. She knew most in the Seven Kingdoms shared her beliefs and would not convert to a foreign religion.

“I am here to serve the Lord however he wishes me to, my lady,” The Red Woman answered
simply. “Sooner or later, the truth is made known to all. If I am to be an instrument in that, so be it.”

“And yet here you are clearly serving a bastard of a northern House,” Her grandmother voiced the question she had been about to ask herself. “Are there no bastards in Essos for you to serve?”

“All men are equal in the eyes of the Lord of—” Melisandre began.

“We are at your table, Lady Olenna,” Jon spoke over her, looking her grandmother dead in the eye. “Have we accepted your invitation to share your meat and mead only for you to lash insults at my companions and myself?”

“Yes, boy, my table.” Her grandmother responded hotly. “You are of the North; it seems they allow bastards to act in a manner above their station. Here in the civilised lands, however, we ensure all know their place. Surely your fancy new god has made you aware of that?”

“Do not presume to insult the Lord of Light, my lady.” The Red Priestess said, her tone causing her to shudder. She knew her brother and grandmother felt it, but it would do little to deter Olenna.

“I am not insulting your Lord of Light. What is he called again? Reeler? Roy or something like that?” She just could not help herself. “It is your earthly master I am speaking of and I do not insult him but merely remind him of his—”

“That is enough, grandmother.” Willas said firmly. “They have eaten our food and drank at our table; they are our guests now and will be treated as such.”

“As you say,” Grandmother conceded with a smirk at Jon and Melisandre.

“Well, if that’s all the banter we’ll be having, I think I’ll go find a nice spot to piss,” Maro jeered as he rose from the table, seizing the pitcher of wine and strolling off without looking back.

Grandmother’s face was not one of amusement as she watched the man stroll off with their wine, but she herself found his boldness refreshing.

“I apologise for the unpleasant turn in conversation, Jon,” She said to the man across from her brother. “We have also been travelling for quite some time, I am sure you understand how frustrating it can be to begin and end each day without the comforts of home.”

Jon looked at the food in front of them before answering.

“You do not seem to be lacking comforts, my lady.”

She laughed at his response; he certainly had a point there. She imagined they would have made much more progress had they been travelling lighter, but their House had an image to maintain.

“How did you come to possess a direwolf, Jon?” Her brother asked with interest, he had a particular affinity for animals.

“We found Ghost and his littermates when we were returning to Winterfell, we accompanied Lord Stark as he carried out his duties,” Jon answered. “Their mother was already dead, but the pups were healthy enough, so we claimed them for our own. All of Lord Stark’s children have one.”

She knew her brother’s eyebrows would be almost touching his brown hair upon hearing this, but she herself had eyes only for Jon. She could not figure out Lord Stark’s meaning as she looked upon him.
‘He is all his mother, though you can see his father in him too, if you know what to look for,’ They were the words Lord Stark had told her when they first discussed Jon.

Looking at the man now, the words only confused her further. She could see his father, Lord Stark, in him without needing to know what to look for.

‘Perhaps his mother was also of the North?’ She reasoned as she focused on the dark hair and solemn face.

“Even Sansa?” Her brother asked Jon, knocking her out of her reverie.

“Even Sansa,” Jon confirmed. “She has named hers Lady, she is perhaps the most behaved of the litter – but still capable of keeping my sister safe, should the need arise.” A note of brotherly protection was clear in his tone. She had heard it often enough, growing up with three older brothers.

“I assure you, Jon, my brother will be the best husband to your sister,” She promised him. The note of protection in his voice was enough for her to accept that he was who he claimed to be.

“Even if he were a poor husband, it would certainly be an improvement compared to what she almost ended up with.” Grandmother said with obvious irritation. She was clearly not happy with a bastard presuming ill of her grandson.

“On that we can agree, my lady,” Jon answered Olenna, surprising them all. “Thankfully, I had few interactions with Joffrey in Winterfell, though even they were too much for my liking.”

Her grandmother was looking at Jon with a hint of begrudging respect. She valued those who spoke their minds, especially when the words could be considered dangerous.

“We should mind our words about our future ruler,” Willas said. “He may not be a good man, but he will be our King before long.”

“Do not be so certain, Lord Willas,” Melisandre said to her brother, though her eyes were fixed on Olenna. “You say a fortnight has passed since the King’s death, yet this Joffrey has not ascended the throne. Perhaps Robert will be the only Stag King to sit the Iron Throne.”

Silence followed these words. She noticed Garret’s eyes flitting between Jon and Melisandre, but he had yet to say anything.

“Garret,” Margaery directed her attention to him. “You have yet to say anything. How did you come to find yourself in Jon’s company?”

Garret startled at being addressed directly, she could tell he was quiet man by nature and was uncomfortable to have all eyes at the table upon him. He looked once more at Jon and Melisandre, when they both nodded at him, he began to speak.

“I was serving Lord Stannis as a guard on Dragonstone, Lady Margaery,” He said plainly. “I was assigned to keep watch on the Lady Melisandre whilst she conducted her business on the island. She taught me of the one true God and I decided to join her in her ministry of Westeros.”

“And where did you meet the other two?” Olenna asked Garret almost as soon as he was finished speaking.

“Maro was the captain of the ship that brought the Lady Melisandre to Dragonstone, m’lady. I met him when the Lady’s business on Dragonstone was concluded and we returned to his ship. We met
Lord Jon when we sailed for the North,” It was then he started to look truly uncomfortable. “The Lord of Light prompted the Lady Melisandre to journey to Winterfell and she did. That is how our little group came to be, Lady Margaery.”

“Did you have family on Dragonstone, Garret?” Margaery asked the man, shocked that he would leave his home to follow a woman he had only just met.

It was apparently a sore subject for Garret, however, as he lowered his gaze and a look of sadness was clear upon his face.

“No longer, m’lady. Once I had a wife and the promise of a child,” His voice caught on that last word. “Neither survived the birthing bed.”

She felt a rush of sympathy for the man. She looked at his companions in an attempt to urge them to offer comfort to their friend, but she could see from the expression on Jon’s face that this was news to him as well. The Lady Melisandre did not look surprised, in fact, she did not look moved at all.

‘Perhaps that is how she convinced him to follow her?’ She thought, feeling something akin to disgust at the idea of such a tactic. ‘Using his grief to alter his mind to suit her own needs.’

She would say none of that to the woman, she intended to gather information that would serve them well when they reached Winterfell. She could not simply ignore the painful memories she had forced Garret to experience, though.

“I am sorry to have sent your mind back to such a difficult time, Garret,” She said kindly as she poured a glass of wine and handed it to him. “To have felt love is a gift but to lose it is, I imagine, the worst pain one could feel in this life. To bear that pain along with the loss of a child, well, I cannot pretend to understand. I am sorry for your suffering.”

She had not been expecting the man to reply, he merely nodded and mumbled about excusing himself. He looked to Jon before rising from the table.

“Garret,” Jon said softly. “I am sorry, I never thought to ask why you followed Melisandre. If you ever wish to talk, well, you know where I am.” He offered his companion a small smile that did not seem feigned at all.

“T-thank you, m’lord,” He said, obviously flustered. He bowed to Jon and the Lady Melisandre before walking off in the direction Maro had taken.

“You did not know?” Margaery asked Jon quietly.

“I truly did not,” He said, wearing the same shamed expression his father wore that day in the capital. “I have been with him for months now, but I never thought to ask. I will have to make up for it, he has been nothing but loyal to me.”

“Which begs the question,” Olenna piped up. “Why would he be loyal to a northern bastard?”

“Grandmother, please,” Margaery pleaded.

“It is a fair question, my lady,” Jon said before Olenna could reply. “I am afraid I cannot answer it, however. I would not dishonour your hospitality by lying to your faces, so I will remain silent on the matter.”

She knew her grandmother would find some offence in that, but Margaery was surprised by his
honesty. He followed after his father in character as well as looks, it seemed.

“Thank you for your honesty, Jon,” Willas said, his own appraising gaze fixed on Jon. “Perhaps you could tell us a little more about Sansa and your home?”

“My lord,” Melisandre said before Jon could answer. “If you do not have need of me, I will find the others and speak with Garret.”

“Of course,” Jon said. “He might only wish for the company of ale in his present state, but perhaps it would be wise to keep an eye on them. We do not want Maro saying the wrong thing to Garret with his painful memories fresh in his mind.”

"My thoughts exactly, my lord,” Melisandre said as she rose from the table. “Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Willas. My ladies.” She bowed to each of them before moving to follow her companions.

She felt a rush of excitement now that they had Jon alone. She did not know nearly enough about him to judge his intelligence, but they had already underestimated one northerner’s ability with words, they would not make that mistake.

“So, Jon,” She said after sharing a look with her grandmother. “Tell me of my goodsister-to-be.”
The hours passed almost unnoticed as they listened to Jon.

They asked questions when they felt it necessary, but mostly they remained silent as Jon told them of her brother’s future wife, of Winterfell, of his siblings and of the North itself.

His affection for his family was obvious in the way he spoke of them; she felt a surge of excitement at the prospect of meeting the rest of Lord Stark’s children.

Grandmother had cut in every now and then with one of her barbs or witty remarks. Willas remained the most silent with his expression one of utmost concertation. He was a thinker, her eldest brother, he would be crafting multiple scenarios in his mind to make the best impression when first meeting his betrothed.

‘How unfortunate that your dear sister will also be present at that time,’ She said to herself, feeling no small amount of glee at the thought.

Jon’s companions had not returned, she suspected that they were offering what comfort they could to Garret. She felt guilty for dredging up the past of a man she just met, but she had no way of knowing. She would be sure to say farewell to him before they parted.

It was as Jon was telling them of Lord Stark’s wife, Lady Catelyn, that her grandmother asked the question that shattered Jon’s mood.

“And what of your mother, Snow?” She asked bluntly. “You have talked about your siblings, your father, your family, even the staff of Winterfell, yet you say nothing of your own mother. Why?”

She was about to apologise on behalf of her grandmother’s bluntness, but the words caught in her throat when she noticed the pained look in Jon’s eyes.

‘She died birthing him,’ She recalled, the expression on Lord Stark’s face as he told her clear in her mind. ‘I did not think to tell grandmother. She would not care to hear of Lord Stark’s bastard son when she listened to me speak of my interactions with the man.’

“You do not have to say anything, Jon,” She said softly to the man, suppressing the urge to reach over the table and hold his hand. “Your father told me a little of her and how she, well, I’m sure you know what he told me.”

“Lord Stark told you this himself?” Jon asked surprised.

“Yes, Jon. He and I were among the common folk in King’s Landing on a charity outing. As we finished for the day the conversation turned towards family. This is the reason for my mistrusting you when I first saw you and heard who you claimed to be. He said you resembled your mother in appearance, that your father would only be found in you if one knew what to look for. Your father’s looks are as clear as day, however, hence my suspicion.”

His eyes widened as she finished speaking. She was not sure if it was surprise or fear or, she dreaded, anger at his story being told to a complete stranger.

He cleared his throat and took a long sip of the wine the servants had kept refilling. He looked at Margaery with a calculating expression, which he directed at Olenna and Willas before he finally spoke.
“I only learned of my mother a few months ago,” His voice was low and gravelly. “Before that, Lord Stark wouldn’t even tell me her name.” He stopped and turned to face his wolf, Ghost, patting him as the beast nuzzled its snout against Jon’s cheek.

She looked at her brother and grandmother, hoping for some help to steer the conversation away from this unhappy subject. Her grandmother merely nodded in encouragement, a conspiratorial look on her face. Willas, was looking uncomfortable and a little pained as he shifted in his seat.

‘His leg,’ She thought sadly. ‘It often pains him if he sits for too long.’

“Willas, I am sure grandmother and I will be safe should you wish to stretch your legs and see to the men.” She said kindly, offering her brother a way out that allowed him to save face.

Willas looked at grandmother, knowing it was her permission he needed. Olenna only nodded once more.

“Jon, pray excuse me,” Willas said as he rose from the table. “Please, there’s no need,” He said as Jon also started to rise. “I shall try to return before you depart. It was nice to meet you, Jon.”

“You as well, my lord,” Jon said with a genuine smile.

Jon looked away politely as Willas struggled to make the first few steps, he kept his gaze on Ghost for a few moments before turning to Margaery and Olenna.

“Lord Stark must have a great deal of trust for you and your family, my ladies,” He said softly. “He is fiercely protective of his children, truth be told, I feared for the men who would one day seek his daughter’s hands in marriage. If he believes your brother will make a good husband for Sansa, I cannot doubt that it will be so.”

She knew he was also including the fact that he had told Margaery of Jon’s mother, but she was touched nonetheless by his genuine words.

“Thank you, Jon,” She said warmly. “You need no longer fear for the men who ask for Sansa’s hand.”

“Not for Sansa’s hand, no,” He laughed. “I still fear for the poor souls who try and ask Arya for her hand. Her father will be the least of their fears.”

His laughter was a pleasant sound to hear, it was also rather infectious, but she only allowed herself a small laugh. She had to maintain the image of a proper lady in front of her grandmother, after all.

“I think I would like this younger sister of yours, Snow,” Grandmother said to Jon. “The ladies of the South are a tedious lot; one has to wade through minutes of courtesy and protocol just to ask their opinion of the weather.”

Jon only laughed a little louder at her grandmother’s words and she was pleased to see a small smile appear on Olenna’s face as well.

“Might I ask you something, Jon?” She ventured. She spoke quickly once Jon nodded his consent. “The Lady Melisandre. Is she your, well, your lady? Only,” She wanted to make her reasons for asking quite clear. “It is most strange for a man of the North to be in the company of a foreign priestess. I mean no offence.”

Her grandmother snorted at her rambling, but she kept her gaze on Jon. They had all had a fair amount of wine, so she had to work harder to keep her tongue in check.
“I take no offence, my lady. Melisandre is a beautiful woman, but no, she is not my lover.” He placed his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his fist. “I am afraid that once more my only choices are to lie to you or remain silent. I hope you will forgive me for choosing the lesser of two offences, my ladies.”

“Is it really so big a secret?” Olenna asked loudly. “I knew the men of the North tended to be private, but you are a clear indication that I was underestimating them in that regard. What can you tell us about yourself, young Snow?”

She wanted to know that as well, but she was glad her grandmother had been the one to ask. She had only known the man for a few hours, but he was intriguing. There was something about him that was utterly unique.

“There is not much to know, Lady Olenna,” Jon said with humility. “Ask what you will, but please do not take offence if I choose to remain silent on the matter.”

He did not know that he had said the right words. Olenna leaned forwards with a look on her face that Margaery imagined a cat would have when it cornered a mouse.

“You say your father commanded you to meet with him, yet your attire suggests you have been travelling for quite some time. Why is that? A disagreement with your father’s wife, perhaps?”

She knew her grandmother would manage to ask the right questions in the wrong ways, but she remained silent to present a united front. She hoped Jon would answer, she wanted to know more of him but thus far he seemed to be intent on remaining a mystery.

“I travelled to the Wall to visit my uncle there. This was shortly after Lord Stark departed for King’s Landing,” Jon said, surprising her with his decision to answer. “The journey there was long and eventful,” His voice took on a darker tone as he continued. “After I left the Wall, I then decided to travel to Greywater Watch to meet with the lord there, he knew my mother and I wished to hear more of her. It was there I received word to meet with Lord Stark here in the South.”

‘Just after his father left for King’s Landing,’ She worked through the time in her head. ‘That was almost a year ago, surely. Why would he wish to remain on the road for that long?’

Once again, her grandmother asked the question first.

“There were complications I had not foreseen, Lady Olenna. I am afraid that is all I will say.” Jon replied firmly.

Olenna huffed. “Why does your father wish to meet with you and only you?” She demanded. “Why not his heir or his wife?”

That was fair question, but she knew that Jon would not answer it and so she was not surprised when he merely smiled apologetically.

“What do you miss most about home?” Margaery asked.

“My family, Lady Margaery,” He answered instantly. “I miss training with Robb and watching Arya train with her own instructor. I miss Bran climbing when he thinks his mother is not looking. Rickon, my youngest brother, is always tearing through the castle with Shaggydog, his direwolf,” He clarified when Margaery raised a quizzical eyebrow. “He is the one you will need to watch out for when you arrive, they were all still pups when I left, I do not know if they are larger than Ghost now.”
“Are they all the same colour as Ghost?” She asked, looking fondly at the large wolf at Jon’s side.

“No, with the exception of Shaggydog’s black fur, they are all differing shades of grey. Like the sigil of House Stark,” He smiled, sounding like he was saying it more to himself than Margaery, his gaze once more on his direwolf.

She turned to look at her grandmother, almost recoiling at the pointed look she was giving her. She narrowed her eyes a little to as the silent question, but Olenna merely looked at Jon before standing from the table.

“Well, it seems you prefer to answer my granddaughter’s questions instead of mine,” She looked pleased as Jon rose from the table as well. “I will go and see what a mess Willas has made of the camp tonight. You’ll understand if I leave Left here to ensure you remember yourself alone with my granddaughter.”

“Left, my lady?” Jon asked with confusion.

“Erryk or Arryk, whichever one he is,” She said dismissively, but Margaery knew she felt a certain affection for them. “Could you tell them apart, Snow? I think not, now,” She looked down at her granddaughter. “Do not tell your oaf of a father I left you alone with young Snow here, I would rather avoid having to deal with a tantrum when we reunite.”

“It will be our little secret, grandmother,” She said sweetly.

Olenna fixed another pointed look at Jon before turning and departing. Left remained behind a short distance away, close enough to reach her in a hurry but just out of hearing range.

“ Alone at last,” She teased, sensing what his reaction would be.

She smirked as the blush crept upon his face, evident even in the dwindling daylight.

“Forgive me, it was too tempting to resist,” She said with a small laugh. “I am sorry for any offence my grandmother may have caused, Jon. She is not one to mince her words, though she could take more care with them.”

“There is nothing to apologise for, my lady,” Jon answered quickly. “Truth be told, our first meeting was not exactly calm.” He looked once more at the wolf at his side, it cocked its head to the side in response to the look Jon gave it. “Even in the North, direwolves are not a common sight. I do not think any have been seen south of the Wall in centuries.”

“Yet now there are six,” She said. “I hope Willas will be safe with his wife having command of a large direwolf?” She was jesting, but her concern was genuine.

“As I said, Lady was the best behaved before I left,” Jon said reassuringly before smiling. “Unless Arya has influenced her, your brother will be safe.”

“Is she your favourite sister?” She asked cheekily. “I know we are not supposed to have favourites, but we are only human. Loras is my favourite brother,” She whispered. “But I do not love the rest any less.”

“Aye, she’s my favourite,” Jon admitted. “Sansa and I are not that close; I know more of her than she does of me.”

“Why is that?”
“She only knows me as her half-brother,” He said quietly. “Her bastard half-brother.”

Margaery did not know what to say to that. It was almost unheard of for a lord to raise their baseborn children alongside their trueborn sons and daughters. She could imagine the ire Lady Stark must have felt at having another woman’s son under her roof, if Sansa was emulating her mother then perhaps that is where her indifference to Jon stemmed from.

“Perhaps Willas will be able to help the two of you establish a better relationship when they are married?” She offered, attempting to cheer him up. “You and your siblings would be welcome to visit Highgarden when it becomes her home.”

“Perhaps,” Jon answered. He looked up at the darkening sky as if searching for something.

She allowed him a few seconds of silence, hoping that he was not preparing to depart. She turned her own gaze to the sky to look at the emerging stars. When she looked back at Jon, she immediately noticed the absence of his direwolf.

It did not take her long to find Ghost, he was at her side and his head was tilted to one side. His red eyes were fixed on hers.

She turned and gave a reassuring smile to Left, correctly assuming he was closing the distance in response to the wolf approaching her. As formidable as her grandmother’s guards were, she had been told how the wolf managed to dodge an arrow from almost point blank range. She did not want to find out if Ghost was faster than Left’s sword swing.

She slowly reached out a hand to pet Ghost, keeping it visible and her eyes on the beast to gauge his reaction. This time he allowed her to close the distance and she petted the side of his large head.

“You’re just a big softy, aren’t you?” She asked the wolf; his fur was indeed quite soft.

She had yet to hear Ghost make a sound other than breathing, he certainly was the most unique animal she had ever met.

She continued to pet Ghost as she looked at Jon, ready to pull his attention from the sky but she did not have to, he was already looking at her with a fond smile.

“Seems you’ve made a new friend,” He observed.

“Yes, perhaps I will take him off your hands,” She said cheekily. “I would love to brush his coat, perhaps even give him a nice red bow to match his eyes.” She giggled at the look of mock horror on Jon’s face.

“You would have to bathe him as well then,” He said to her in a falsely serious voice. “Perhaps we could bathe him now, so you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Hmm,” She turned her gaze to the wolf at her side. “Would you like that, Ghost? Is it time for a bath?”

They both laughed loudly as the wolf jumped out of her touch and sprinted off in the direction of the woods.

“I have never seen him move so fast,” Jon said through his laughter. “I do hope you haven’t scared him off for good, I am quite fond of him.”

“I can see why,” She replied, her own laughter settling a little. “He’s beautiful, in a terrifying sort
Their laughter died down after a few moments, she relished the fact that she was talking with someone and there was no plotting or clever wordplay. She was enjoying the company as well.

“What else did Lord Stark tell you of my mother?” Jon asked suddenly, taking her by surprise.

He clearly wished to avoid the subject earlier, perhaps now that he felt more at ease with it being just the two of them, he was more comfortable discussing his departed mother.

“That she passed shortly after birthing you, that he named you because she did not have the chance to. I admit,” She hesitated, reaching the point they had before. “I am confused about his words regarding your appearance. He is no liar, that I know, but he said you favoured your mother and yet I see only a Stark before me.”

Jon looked uncomfortable again, but he did not shut down as he had before. He looked at her long and hard, as if deciding something. She waited, hoping he would tell her whatever it was he was thinking about, but also hoping that he wouldn’t. She had no doubt her grandmother would be waiting to interrogate her the moment she left Jon’s company.

“I enjoy your company, my lady,” Jon began. “If I should be so fortunate as to be in it again, I’ll tell you of my mother. I assure you, however, you are correct in your belief that Lord Stark is no liar. He is the most honourable man I have ever met.”

She could not help the feeling of disappointment that swelled within her, but she would have to be satisfied with the new piece of information Jon had, unintentionally, given to her.

“Might I ask you a question, Lady Margaery?”

“Of course, Jon,” She smiled. “It is only fair. Please, call me Margaery.”

“Margaery,” He agreed. “Why did you choose to accompany your brother to Winterfell?”

That was not the question she had been expecting him to ask.

“Your father offered me the hospitality of Winterfell after we talked about your homeland,” She said, recalling the man’s words. “I have read quite a bit of the North and its culture, your father made it seem all the more enticing so, when the opportunity came to visit, I seized it.” She finished with another smile.

“I hope you will enjoy your time there, Margaery,” He said with warmth. “If Greyjoy gives you any trouble, be sure to let me know and I’ll set your new friend on him. Assuming he returns after the threat of a bath has subsided.” He broke out in renewed laughter that Margaery joined him in.

She was not expecting much of Theon Greyjoy from what Jon had told them of him, but she knew how to deal with those who lusted after her. She wished Jon would be accompanying them back to his home, but she could only hope he returned there before she had to journey back to Highgarden.

Jon was once more looking up at the sky. Night had fallen almost an hour ago, the stars were shining particularly bright overhead. She was about to suggest they go for a short walk, but Jon spoke before she opened her mouth.

“I am afraid I will have to take my leave, Margaery,” He sounded reluctant, but his gaze was flitting to the sky every second or so. “Please extend my gratitude to your brother and grandmother for their hospitality.”
“I am sure Willas will not mind you sharing camp with our men, Jon,” she said, feeling more than a little upset at the abrupt decision.

“I am afraid it would not be safe, Margaery,” Jon replied slowly. “Ghost is a soft ball of fur, but at night when he has been hunting, well, it takes a while for him to overcome his instincts.”

She could not argue with that. Willas had told her of enough animals that were slaves to their instincts, but she wished he did not have to go just yet.

“Will you not wait for your companions, Jon?”

“They will know where to find me. The Lady Melisandre has her ways,” he replied ominously as he rose to his feet. “I can count on one hand the number of pleasant experiences I’ve had during my travels, meeting you is certainly one of them.”

She could feel the brush spreading on her face, his words had taken her by surprise, and she could not meet his eyes for a few seconds. This did not happen to her very often.

“One of the better ones, I hope?” she teased.

“If not the best,” Jon returned with a smirk.

“Well, I pray it is not long before we have the chance to talk again,” she said genuinely. “Perhaps we could ambush Ghost with that bath? I will be sure to find a bow just the right shade of red for him.” She chuckled as did Jon.

“I will think of a few ways to achieve that; we can talk strategy when next we meet.”

“Until next time then, Jon,” she said, offering her hand to him.

“Until next time,” Jon said as took her hand and kissed it. “Margaery.”

They stood there for a few moments longer than was necessary, but Jon let her hand go much sooner than she would like. He turned and walked off in the same direction Ghost had sprinted off in. She stood there and watched his retreating figure until the treeline had swallowed him whole.

She turned and nodded to Left, who proceeded to walk behind her as she returned to the carriage she shared with her grandmother.

She looked at the hand Jon had held and kissed. His skin was much warmer than she had been expecting, almost too warm. She hoped he was not sickening with a fever of some kind.

“My lady,” one of the servants greeted her at the carriage. “Lady Olenna asks that you see her in her tent, my lady.”

“Very well,” she said to the young woman. “Thank you.”

She knew which tent would be her grandmother’s, Right would be standing outside of it like some kind of statue.

Sure enough, there he was looking as still as a tree before the entrance to her grandmother’s tent.

‘Perhaps we should call him Left, now,’” she thought to herself in amusement, taking note of the man’s position outside the tent.

She thanked Left, or Right as she should now call him, and entered her grandmother’s tent.
“Well,” Olenna said as soon as the flaps were closed.

She sighed, readying herself to report on her time with yet another man of House Stark.
She knew it might seem improper to leave her granddaughter with a bastard they had just met, but there was something more to this Jon Snow and it was clear neither she nor Willas would be the ones to coax it out of him.

As with most men, he was powerless against her beautiful Rose’s charm. Though he did offer some resistance at first, the wine she ensured had remained on hand had done its job of loosening him up a little.

‘Now, all I can do is wait,’ She thought to herself with distaste.

They had planned for years to wed Margaery to the future King, but that was not to be since Robert refused the betrothal. She was relieved, of course, because she knew the type of husband Joffrey would have been to Margaery. His father refusing the match had saved the boy’s life, though he would never know it.

The moment the eunuch visited her in Highgarden, appearing as if out of thin air as she enjoyed the quiet of her garden, her mind had been churning as she thought of how a Targaryen restoration might come about. She had her spies, as did any competent player in the Great Game, but the only Targaryens they turned up were Viserys and Daenerys, the remaining children of The Mad King.

She knew that a child of Rhaegar’s still lived, she knew it was not Rhaenys or Aegon as their deaths were infamous in the Seven Kingdoms. She would do anything to keep her family safe, but that was a line she would never cross. She would have sent the children away, ensured they did not remember their true identity – they were both young enough, after all.

How Robert could simply pardon the man everyone knew to be responsible for those heinous crimes was beyond her, but the fool was dead now, which raised another issue in the realm.

No word had reached them declaring the dawn of Joffrey’s reign. It was almost two weeks since the King died, yet all they had heard was that Lord Stark had recorded the King’s will and would let it be known to the realm when Robert decreed it should be.

She knew the man was playing the Game himself, he was surprisingly well equipped for it. She also knew, however, that he was not playing it to seat himself of the throne. He had turned down a royal betrothal, after all. He was playing for someone else, a player none of them knew of she was sure.

The drawing Varys had left her in Highgarden was clasped in her hand. She knew from that moment the Starks were involved in the plot to restore the Targaryens, but she could not figure out why they would want to see the Iron Throne back in the claws of the Dragons.

His own sister, Lyanna, had been taken and raped by Rhaegar. At least, that was what the realm believed. She could not believe the Dragon Prince would do such a thing.

Her granddaughter’s voice reached her as she thanked her guard for escorting her. She felt a rush of excitement as she stepped through the entrance.

“Well?” She demanded, fixing her with an expectant look.

Margaery sighed but she knew better than to refuse her grandmother.
“I do not know what you hoped I would learn, grandmother,” she said softly, coming over to sit on the chair next to her. “He said little else about Winterfell or the Starks that we could use. What were you expecting?”

“What did Lord Stark say to you about his bastard’s appearance?”

“That he resembles his mother in appearance and he left little of himself in Jon,” Margaery said with clear irritation. “As we both know, he was wrong about that. He looks just as much of a Stark as his father, though.” She blushed a little. “He is quite good looking; his face is not exactly that of Lord Stark’s own, but the differences are subtle.”

“It sounds like you enjoy looking at his face,” she quipped, ignoring her granddaughter’s deepening blush as her mind worked.

‘He does indeed resemble Lord Stark, but Margaery is right,’ she reeled off rapidly. ‘There are differences between the two. Why would he say the boy took after his mother when it was clear to see the Stark in him?’

She glanced at the hastily drawn direwolf in her palm, thinking of the boy’s own direwolf. She had been terrified the first time she laid eyes upon it, it did not seem natural, but she was amazed at the amount of control Snow appeared to have over it.

Then there was this business that required him to travel to meet with Lord Stark. What could he need to speak with him about that could not be discussed via raven? Why was Lord Stark prepared to leave the capital to meet with his bastard son when the Kingdom was currently relying on him following the King’s death?

“Did he say anything about his reasons for meeting with his father?” she asked her blushing Rose.

“No, I asked but he would not say.” she answered. “Did you notice he never called him father? It was always Lord Stark.”

She looked at her granddaughter with sharp eyes, pieces fitting into position but not yet having the full picture.

“I know, it is a small detail and easily explainable but—”

“Explain it, then,” she cut across her granddaughter.

“He is ashamed of his status and does not wish to tarnish his father’s honour further,” Margaery said confidently.

“Then he clearly cares nothing for those he openly declares his siblings,” she countered. “Did it sound like he cared nothing for them?”

“No, grandmother,” Margaery replied, looking down at her feet before meeting her eyes once more. “He knows who his mother is, but he would not tell me. He also confirmed that Lord Stark was not lying when he said he resembles his mother. I think—” she broke off as if considering her next words.

“Go on, dear,” she said kindly. It was always best to alternate between soft and firm with her little Rose.

“Perhaps his mother is also from the North, there is a cadet branch of House Stark called House Karstark,” she sounded uncertain but continued, nonetheless. “What if Lord Stark fathered Jon on
a daughter of House Karstark before he was married to Lady Catelyn? After all, she was betrothed to his brother, Brandon, but he died after he—”

She stopped her granddaughter with a raised hand.

Brandon Stark had charged to the capital to demand the return of his sister, Lyanna.

She stared at the direwolf drawing in her hand, her mind working furiously to put the pieces together.

‘A Karstark being the boy’s mother would make sense, but then why would his father only be seen in him by those who knew him?’ She held the picture of the boy’s face in her mind. Studying it intently as it faded.

“Grandmother,” She heard Margaery say but she raised her hand once more, unwilling to break her thoughts.

‘Why would he not speak of the boy’s mother if she were a Karstark? The relation would be distant,’ She followed the train of thought. ‘Surely the mother’s family would embrace the boy as one of their own, even if he was a bastard. No,’ She decided. ‘His mother is not a Karstark.’

Then why did the boy look so much like Lord Stark when both he and Snow claimed he resembled his mother?

“Do you remember exactly what he said to you?” She asked her granddaughter suddenly. “What Lord Stark said when he told you of Snow’s mother. Do you?”

"Y-yes, I think—”

“You think?” She snapped.

“I-I remember it,” She said hesitantly.

“Out with it, then,” She said, knowing she would need to apologise later.

“He said, he is all his mother, though you can see—” She stopped, her mouth hanging open. “Wait, I remember something else Lord Stark said. I did not notice it until now.”

“What is it?” She asked impatiently.

“He never called Lord Stark his father—”

“Yes, you’ve said this but—”

“Senna asked him if he had children of his own, and he said, I do, Senna. The Gods have blessed me with three sons and two daughters. What if—”

“He is not Snow’s father at all,” Olenna finished, her voice calm as her mind once more raced.

‘He claimed the boy as his bastard openly, so why would he not acknowledge him when speaking to a lady of the South?’ She worked through the possibilities. ‘Unless it was intentional.’

She focused once more on the direwolf drawing in her palm. She knew she had all the correct pieces, she just needed to put them together correctly.

_He is all his mother._
He also confirmed that Lord Stark was not lying when he said he resembles his mother.

The Gods have blessed me with three sons and two daughters.

‘Lord Stark knew what he was doing, he knew Margaery would not recognise what he had just given her,’ She said as she remembered the words her granddaughter repeated to her.

The rebellion was built on a lie, my lady.

The dragons are not all gone. One is forgotten, two are in exile but there is another. A hidden dragon.

I’ve sat on this information for years, waiting and watching.

‘The eunuch’s words make sense now,’ She recalled the key points of their discussion in Highgarden. ‘If anyone other than Lord Stark knew, it would be Varys. How did the northern fool manage to keep him hidden for so long? Why would he risk it all for a relative of the man who murdered his father and brother? The same man who fathered the prince whom supposedly took and raped his sister? Oh!’

The pieces all fit together then. She was appalled she had not put it together sooner, but she realised she could not have done it without the obvious clue he had given to Margaery.

“Oh,” She laughed with relief, confident she had reached the correct conclusion.

“What is it?” Margaery asked but she was still thinking how best to break the news to her granddaughter.

“Lord Stark is a far greater player than we thought, even after meeting him in the capital. Do you not see?” She asked her granddaughter, continuing without waiting for an answer. “He knew better than to give us all the pieces at the same time, so his friend showed me to the door whilst Lord Stark gave you the key to open it.” She could not suppress her glee.

“I do not understand. What—”

She leaned forward so she could speak to her granddaughter without anyone else hearing.

“Eddard Stark is not Jon Snow’s father,” She whispered, placing her fingers on her granddaughter’s lips to prevent her from interrupting. “He is his uncle. He looks like a Stark because he resembles his mother. His mother was Lyanna Stark, which means his father can only be Robert Baratheon or Rhaegar Targaryen. If it was Robert, why would Stark hide his best friend’s son from him?”

Again, she did not wait for an answer. “He would not. He claimed the boy as his own bastard to prevent him from sharing the same fate as his siblings. Do you understand?”

She removed her fingers from Margaery’s lips and leaned back a little to take in her expression. There was nothing but blank shock written upon her lovely face, but she knew the pieces were fitting together in her own mind.

“Yes,” She said as Margaery’s mouth fell into a perfect circle. “We have just found our Hidden Dragon.”
My little pup,

Your father and I cannot wait to meet you.

Your father is certain you will be a girl, but I am certain you are a boy. Since it is my body you are currently growing inside of, I think it only fair we assume that I am right.

I have not yet met you, but you are already the most important person in the world to me. I’m not one for sentimentality, which I hope you will learn as you grow up, but I could not bear the thought of the worst happening and you never knew how much you meant to me.

I am scared, I can admit that with ink and parchment. My mother, your grandmother, died giving birth to your uncle Benjen. I pray to the Old Gods that the same will not happen to me, but if only one of us is to survive your coming into the world – let it be you.

I hope that you never have to read this letter.

I hope that your father and I can raise you happily alongside your big brother and sister. You will not be alone even if the worst should happen to me. Elia has promised to raise you as her own if I do not survive.

I regret not a moment of the time I have carried you. My days and nights are lonely without your father here, he had to ride off to put a certain stubborn stag in his place. I do not know why he claimed what he did, but if your father attempted to take me against my will, well, let’s just say he would not have been able to father you, little one.

I want you to know the truth if things really go from bad to worse. I loved your father, he loved me and we both married with Elia’s consent. She is my friend, sister, and I consider her a part of our family.

I sent letters to my father, your uncle Brandon and Robert himself. Your father sent his own to his father and Elia’s family in Dorne, but we received no reply other than learning that the realm was at war and your grandfather and uncle were slain.

I am running out of energy, since you seem to be hogging it all for yourself, there are plenty of other letters for you to read should these be the only way for you to know me. This one is just for you, my little pup.

Whether you are reading this as Visenya, as your father insists upon calling you or as Daeron, as I look forward to naming you and telling your father I told you so, I’m nothing if not efficient.

All jesting aside, regardless of your name if you are reading this, I love you more than
anything in this world. If the price of you living is my life, I would pay it with a smile.

Still, let us hope that you never read these words, Daeron, or Visenya, and that I can be there for all the moments that matter.

With more love than I ever thought possible,

Your Mother.

He wanted to read the letter again, but between the tears that were streaming from his eyes and the strange light he was using to read it, the words were little more than black dots on the aged parchment.

He struggled to maintain control of his breathing; the hand that was not holding the letter had a tight hold on the white fur of his direwolf. The silent wolf was resting along Jon’s legs, his head perched on his chest, so he was looking up at him. He licked the tears that were falling from his chin and Jon could not help the laugh that escaped him.

‘Daeron,’ He repeated to himself. ‘She named me Daeron, after the Young Dragon. My father believed I would be Visenya.’

He allowed the sobs to come freely as he rested his head against Nyx’s scaly hide. His dragon had curled her body around him so that he could read his mother’s letter using the red light her pulsating veins made. She also bumped her snout softly against Jon’s head, making soft trilling sounds that he found comforting.

He felt the moment was right to read the letter. His conversation with Margaery had left him yearning to know more of the mother he had only seen used as a means to torture him.

His mythical companions seemed to understand he wanted them with him, it felt right.

Here he was, resting on his dragon with his direwolf’s head on his chest. It was a sight the world had never seen, he knew, and it was his alone to cherish. He tucked the letter away into his breast pocket, where it had been for months. He placed his arms around Ghost, wanting nothing more than to stay in that moment with his friends.

Ghost nuzzled against his chest as Jon breathed in his fur, he felt Nyx shift as she hitched her wing over them, so that it hid Jon and Ghost from view – not that there was anyone to see.

Nyx brought her head around to rest just under the wing that enclosed Jon and Ghost, he stared into the eye that still had not lost its colouring, despite the rest of the purple fading from the veins that covered her body.

He smiled at the dragon before closing his eyes. He prayed that the dreams he would be met with were the happiest he had ever known.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope you have all enjoyed these chapters and that they did not disappoint!

Feel free to leave your thoughts in the comments!
Once again, I wish all of you a Merry Christmas! I hope your days are as magical as Jon's white flames!
Robert’s eyes were closed but his chest continued to rise and fall. He knew his friend would soon fade away, even a man as strong as Robert Baratheon could not hold death at bay forever.

It was a testament to the strength of his best friend that he had been able to cling on for this long.

He was not eager to see his friend die, but he wished Pycelle would hurry and help ease Robert into his eternal sleep. He was not sure how much time he had before his work would begin in earnest, but the pull he had been feeling ever since stepping foot in the Red Keep was growing stronger.

He thought about all he had learned during his time as Hand of the King. He had learned to play the Game, albeit with the aid of his Gods. He learned that a man says much more with the words he does not say out loud, and he learned just how foolish his own ways would have been here in the capital.

He nearly told Robert the truth about the children he thought were his own, despite the many times his Gods had warned him not to do so. His sense of honour had compelled his tongue to ease the burden on his soul, fortunately the Gods had seized him and prevented him from potentially dooming his family to the fate they had revealed to him that day before the Heart Tree.

He could still feel the traces of the burning sensation that had gripped his entire body, the voice that had crashed through his mind had left its mark. The way the voice spoke, it seemed as if it counted itself independent from the rest of the Old Gods.

‘Perhaps it was their leader?’ He reasoned, attempting to distract himself from the dying man before him. ‘Surely even Gods must have a King.’

The door crashed open before he could think about this further and Ned stood, turning to get out of Pycelle’s way.

Only it was not the Grandmaester before him.

“My queen,” He inclined his head respectfully.

Cersei Lannister did not look as if she was about to mourn for her husband of almost twenty years. She had yet to spare the dying King so much as a glance, her gaze was locked on Ned’s face.

“Lord Stark,” She greeted coldly. “Is he dead?”

Her bluntness shocked him, but he knew he should not be so surprised. If Varys was correct, and
Ned believed he was, then this woman had lied to her husband for years and was attempting to place her own bastard on the Iron Throne.

“Not yet, my queen,” Ned answered, unable to keep the sadness from his voice. “I have sent for Grandmaester Pycelle to help ease his passing. He may still hear you, should you wish to offer him words of farewell.”

“I have nothing to say to him,” She said, venom lacing every syllable. “I am here for you, not him.”

“My queen?” He asked, feigning confusion. It was not entirely false.

“What did you and Robert talk about?” She demanded. “Why would he send his wife and brother away to speak his final words to you?”

“He also asked Ser Barristan to stay, my queen,” Ned said. “He—”

“He commanded him to serve as witness, yes, but to what?”

“The King dictated his Will to me, he had Ser Barristan sign it so that no one could question its authenticity.” Ned said calmly, feeling the outburst that would soon come.

“And what exactly is the King’s Will?” Cersei demanded once more; her hands were balled into fists at her side.

He should feel angry at the woman who had passed off her own children as Robert’s all these years, instead he felt nothing but pity for her. To see her before him, shaking with anger but also sensing the fear beneath it all, it was not a sight he wished to see again.

Remain strong, child. Remember our words. Victory is seldom claimed in a single day.

“You will hear of Robert’s Will when the rest of the realm does,” Ned answered. “I can tell you that he named me regent and that—”

“No!” Cersei screamed, causing Ned to flinch back from the sudden outburst. “You will not take my son’s throne from him! You had your chance to claim it; Jaime told me of the day you found him sitting on the Iron Throne. You squandered your chance, you will not take my son’s—”

“I have no desire for the Iron Throne!” He cut her off sharply. “You think I would want to live in the same halls where my father and brother were slaughtered?”

“Then step down as regent,” Cersei’s voice was calm once more, almost soothing. “It was unfair of Robert to ask you to come here and serve him, knowing the pain this place has caused your family. My son may not be ready for his crown, so give the regency to another if you must, but you should not be kept away from your family any longer, Lord Stark. Do you not wish to go home? To be with your children?”

“There is nothing I want more, but I cannot do that.” He answered solemnly. “The King has charged me with the regency and I intend to honour his final command.”

The look on Cersei’s face was positively alarming. It reminded Ned of the expression he saw on The Mad King’s face when he was watching his father burn.

“I will not allow you and that hateful creature to take my son’s throne,” Her voice was still calm, but the restrained fury was evident. “My father will not allow you and that beast to take the power
that is rightfully ours. Surrender the regency and I will see to it that you can return home to your family. If you do not, then—"

"Damn you, woman," A weak voice croaked from behind Ned.

He registered the panicked expression on Cersei’s face as he turned to face his now conscious friend.

“Robert,” Ned began but a knock on the door interrupted him.

“Enter,” Ned called, eager to no longer be alone with the now composed queen.

“Ned,” Renly rushed in, his clothes were still covered in his brother’s blood. “Pycelle and Ser Barristan are on their way. Robert, is he—”

“Renly,” Robert murmured, causing all of them to turn to him once again. “Here.”

Renly rushed over and knelt at the King’s bedside, they did not hold hands as any other brothers might, but they both wore expressions of pain.

“Renly,” Robert’s voice was much weaker than it had been when talking with Ned. “My Will, Ned has it. Make sure—” He took a few rasping breaths before he could continue. “It is honoured. Trust him, Renly. Please. Ned," He turned his face to his friend. "Show him my Will, but wait until the time is right to tell the rest of them. Do what you must for her boy."

"I swear, Robert," Ned said passionately. "I will ensure your last act is honoured."

"Renly," Robert said once more to his brother. "Swear to me that you will help Ned. You may not like what I have decreed, but swear to me you will honour it."

“I will, Robert. I swear it,” Renly promised, his features a mix of confusion and sorrow. “I am sorry, I never should have let you—”

“I should not have downed as much wine as I did, that fool Lancel never could keep my wine flowing—” A cough racked his body. “The only time he does so is when I need my wits the most, funny, no?” He gave a few wheezy chuckles but eventually they died down.

Ned looked at his friend in horror, the words making sense in his mind.

Every time Ned visited Robert’s chamber in an attempt to discuss matters of state, Lancel Lannister never failed to bring the King’s ire upon him as he ran out of wine when the King demanded that his cup never be empty.

‘Yet the only time he ensures there is plenty is when Robert is hunting beasts,’ He thought to himself as the pieces started to shuffle. ‘This was no accident.’

He turned to look at Cersei, certain that she was involved, but the woman was gone. She must have slipped away when their attention had been fixed solely on Robert. It was fortunate he turned when he did, however, as he witnessed Pycelle crossing the threshold of the King’s chambers and spotted Ser Barristan outside the door.

“The King requests Milk of the Poppy, Grandmaester,” He informed the old man. “He wishes to pass peacefully, though he is barely conscious as it is.”

“I will do as the King commands, nonetheless,” Pyelle wheezed. “There is no telling the pain His
Grace must be feeling. It is my duty to ensure he—"

"Forgive me, but time is not on our side. Do you have the ingredients?" Ned cut across him.

"Of course, Lord Hand," The old man looked annoyed at being interrupted. "I shall prepare the mixture now." He turned and shuffled over to the table in the corner of the room, his back was to the rest of them as he prepared the potion.

Ned walked over to Robert’s bedside, he looked down at the man who had been his greatest friend, who still was despite all that happened. He bent over and briefly pressed his lips to the man’s clammy forehead.

"Goodbye, my oldest friend," He choked a little on the words. "Until we meet again."

He looked at Renly, meeting his eyes he offered him a hand which the youngest Stag accepted.

"I understand if you wish to stay with him, Renly," Ned said softly. "But I am afraid I must begin the work the King set me. The Lannisters will not honour Robert’s Will. I hope that you can keep the promise you made to your brother and will not follow their example."

"Robert said to trust you, and I will do that. What is Robert’s Will?"

"It is not safe for it to be made known yet. Besides," He looked once more at the broken form of Robert Baratheon. "Your brother requested a certain amount of time be allowed to pass before it is made known. I need your word now, my lord, that you will not abuse the trust I must place in you. Even after you learn the contents of your brother’s Will. Can you give me that?"

He was pleased that Renly seemed to think his words over before answering.

"You have my word, Lord Stark." He swore.

"Very well," Ned answered, satisfied. "I must take my leave, but I will send for you before the day is through."

He left the room without a backwards glance, trying to preserve the image of his friend as he had known him, not as the broken figure that was dying upon the bed.

"My lord," Ser Barristan greeted him. "What now?"

"Now, we must prepare for what is to come." Ned answered the legendary knight. "The queen suspects something is amiss, no doubt she is preparing her own response to Robert’s death. Ser Barristan," He asked the man suddenly. "Do you not find it odd that the King’s squire would seek to dull his wits when he knew he needed them most?"

The Bold’s eyes shot open as he considered the words. He was no fool, so he clearly arrived at the same conclusion Ned did.

"This was no accident," Barristan said. "Someone took advantage of the King’s hunt to make it look like an accident. We—"

"Let us speak no more of it here, come," Ned said, feeling the pull intensify. "We must find Lord Varys."

It quickly became apparent to Ned that one does not find Lord Varys; Lord Varys finds you.
He and Ser Barristan moved through the halls of the Red Keep without interruption. They were heading for his study; Ned had a feeling he would find the eunuch there. As they turned a corner, they were greeted by the man they were searching for.

“My lord. Ser Barristan,” The Spider greeted, inclining his head. “I trust the King was able to settle matters for the future of the realm?”

“It is not safe to discuss such things in the open like this, Lord Varys. Come,” He began to walk past the eunuch. “We can talk more in my study.”

“You have learned little if you believe that that is a safe place to talk, especially with the current situation. Follow me, my friends,” The Spider walked away from them in the opposite direction to Ned’s study.

He looked at Ser Barristan, whose expression was one of suspicion. He knew Varys had an interest in seeing Jon on the throne, so he decided to trust that – even if he could not trust the man himself.

“We have no choice but to trust him, Ser Barristan,” He told the knight quietly. “He knows of my nephew and has told no one.”

“Very well, Lord Stark,” Ser Barristan conceded.

They followed the enigmatic man as he walked through the halls of the Red Keep. His pace was not hurried, he looked as if he was merely taking a leisurely stroll and not leading them to a place where they could discuss the rightful King.

Ned’s heart soared with fear and pride when he realised the words were true. Even if Robert had invalidated any claim Jon had to the Iron Throne when he overthrew the Targaryens, he had named Jon his heir whilst relinquishing his own claim by right of conquest. Ned was not sure how the politics would work with the finer details, but he understood the most important part: the moment Robert breathed his last, Jon would be the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

He wanted so badly to gather the lords of the realm and announce the King’s Will to them all, but he knew the timing had to be right. Jon must be prepared, even though he has decided to claim the throne, he is not yet ready. According to the figure he had seen in the realm of the Gods, there was something Ned must bring to him so that he might become the man he must be in order to defeat the threat Beyond the Wall.

Something that was hidden in the Red Keep.

He had not been paying attention to where the eunuch was leading them, which was foolish of him, but he had been lost in thought. Upon taking note of the dimness of their surroundings, he almost unsheathed his sword before Varys started to speak.

“These are not the dungeons, my friends,” He said as if he knew what Ned had been thinking. “This is one of the few safe spaces where we can talk. I suspect, my lord,” Ned could feel his eyes on him. “That you will find what you are looking for in a place such as this. Now, tell me what is to be done so that I might do my part.”

* 

He finished telling the eunuch of the conversation he had with Robert. The Spider remained silent during Ned’s speech, as did Ser Barristan.

At last, when he was finished and a few minutes had passed in silence, the eunuch finally spoke.
“Convincing Robert to name Jon his heir was a stroke of brilliance I never expected from you, Lord Stark. No offence, of course,” He added. “That Robert would agree to such a thing, even if it was you who was asking, is something I would never have imagined possible. He must have felt great affection for your sister, for his last act to be one that benefits the son she had with another man.”

He felt guilty upon hearing these words. He knew Robert felt strongly for Lyanna, but he assumed it was more out of a sense of possessiveness and not genuine love. He had been wrong, his last act was indeed one that benefitted Rhaegar’s child, not just Lyanna’s.

‘I am sorry, old friend,’ He said in his heart, hoping his friend’s spirit would hear it when he left his body. ‘If only you had acted differently when the bodies of Elia’s children were laid at your feet, perhaps things could have been better.’

He could not afford to waste time dwelling on the past. They had work to do, but it was with great effort that he pulled himself from his thoughts and returned his attention to the men before him.

“I suspect Cersei had a hand in Robert’s injuries. His squire kept plying the King with wine during the hunt, Ser Barristan,” He turned to the man who had been present. “If Robert was not addled with wine, would he have been wounded by the boar?”

It was not a question the knight could definitively answer, he knew. There were many things that could go wrong whilst hunting prey that could fight back – even for a sober hunter.

“The King may have let his body decline, but he was still strong enough to kill the boar. I suspect it was his pride that pushed him to engage the beast head-on. He threw his first spear at the boar, but his vision must have been too distorted because of the wine. After he missed for a second time, he charged the beast and ordered us not to intervene, that was when it—”

“We understand, Ser Barristan,” Lord Varys said, sparing the man from repeating his failure to protect Robert. “Even the most diligent of protectors are powerless to defend their charges against themselves. You have served him more faithfully than most, especially given how you came to be in his service. However,” He turned to Ned. “That leads us to another concerning point. The Kingsguard. They will be bound by oath to serve Jon, yet among their ranks is—”

“Jaime Lannister,” Ned finished, seeing the problem that could ruin their plans. “He has already broken his vows. I do not believe he will hesitate to do so again, especially since he believes his nephew is the rightful King.”

“Leave that to me,” Varys said ominously. “My lord, do you know why Ser Jaime chose to slay The Mad King?”

“I suspect he plotted it with his father, since it was only himself guarding the King whilst the others joined—”

“Rhaegar ordered Jaime to stay and guard his children, Lord Stark.” Ser Barristan cut across him. “I was there when Rhaegar promised him everything would change when he returned from the Trident. I was there when Jaime swore to defend the prince and princess.”

“He did not, instead he—”

“He killed a man who tasked him with delivering his own father’s head to him,” Varys spoke over him smoothly. “He killed a madman with too much power. The Mad King intended to raze King’s Landing to the ground, he had caches of wildfire placed throughout the city. He instructed his
Hand to set them off and laughed when he thought of Robert being the King of nothing but ashes and cooked meat."

Ned and Ser Barristan both wore expressions of shock and horror as the eunuch said the words.

That Jamie Lannister killed his King for the good of the realm was not something that had ever occurred to Ned. It was easier to assume he had been involved in the plot from the beginning.

‘He still might have been,’ Ned thought, old habits refusing to change so quickly. ‘He may not have been aware of just how insane Aerys was. He did not want all his father worked for to be nothing but ashes. Why else would he leave the children undefended?’

“I assure you, Lord Stark. He played no part in the rebellion.” Varys said, Ned was certain the man could hear his thoughts and it left him even more unsettled.

“What do you suggest we do about Jaime Lannister?” Ned asked him. “He is still a member of the Kingsguard.”

“Yes,” Varys answered with a smirk. “As I said, leave that to me. I will not be able to join you when you leave. My own work requires me to linger here just a little longer.”

“When I leave?” Ned asked, confused.

“Yes, there is something you must bring to your nephew. It does not matter how I know,” He said with a raised hand as Ned opened his mouth. “It is enough that I know. Trust me, he needs it.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I am afraid I do not,” The Spider sounded uncertain. “As I so recently told another, Maegor went to great lengths to ensure the secrets of this place would not be found so easily.”

“I do not understand what you are talking about.” Ser Barristan piped up. “What is it that Jon needs? Robert has named him King in his Will, I signed it myself.”

“Robert has handed him the crown, yes, but there is much more to our future King than you can understand.” Varys answered the Bold. “I do not think it an exaggeration to say that if Jon is not given whatever it is you must find, then he will not live long enough to wear the crown Robert has given him.”

“What?” Both Ned and Ser Barristan exclaimed.

‘Is this true?’ He asked his Gods. ‘Answer me!’ He demanded after a few moments of silence.

*There is much you cannot understand, child. Power comes with a cost, and the boy you raised has more power than any other mortal before him. His body cannot withstand such forces without help. That is why you are here.*

‘Where is it? What am I looking for?’ He asked the question he feared the answer to. ‘How long does he have?’

*Have Varys show you to the mural of the dragon. You will receive further guidance there.*

‘How long does he have?’ He repeated the question, refusing to allow them to remain silent.

*He has already awakened parts of his power. He will soon leave the lands of our embrace, he will weaken quickly then, but our brother will provide what aid he can. You must find what he needs*
and bring it to him when you meet at our last refuge in this land in which we are blind.

‘The God’s Eye?’ He knew where the Gods meant. ‘I must meet him at the God’s Eye?’

Yes, child. Now, find what you must and prepare to depart. Know this, it matters not how you leave things here; chaos will find its way into the realm one way or another. Do your best, as your conscience bids, but allow Varys to play his part. Now, go.

“Lord Varys,” He said, breaking out of his trance. “Take me to mural of the dragon.”

He ignored the looks of confusion on the faces of the men before him.

If Jon’s life depended on what he needed to find, he would pull the Red Keep apart with his bare hands if he had to in order to find it.

“Very well, my friend,” The Spider said, his face once more controlled. “Follow me.”

He thought Lord Varys was leading them to his study in the Tower of the Hand, but before they entered the corridor that led to the base of said tower, the eunuch stopped and faced them.

“This is one way to the room you seek,” The Spider whispered, looking around them to make sure they were alone. “Follow me, quickly.”

He was about to ask what the man was talking about, but he turned away from them and walked straight up to the wall on their left. It looked unremarkable, but the eunuch knelt at the base and Ned heard a soft click before the man stood once more.

“Quickly,” He repeated, glancing over his shoulder before pushing the wall.

Ned gasped when the wall opened the same way a door would. The Spider disappeared as he stepped through and Ned followed him. He could feel Ser Barristan on his heels as he entered the darkened tunnel.

“I am afraid it is a tight squeeze, my friends,” He heard Varys say from somewhere up ahead.

The hidden door closed a few seconds after Ser Barristan had stepped through it. This would ensure they would not be followed, but it also snuffed what little light they had. It was fortunate that the tunnel was so narrow given the lack of light; he did not have to extend his arms fully to use his hands to guide him down the dark passageway.

He could hear Lord Varys humming contentedly in front of him, so he focused on that as he felt the tunnel twist and turn until he lost all sense of direction.

“This might make you a little dizzy, my friends, take your time.” The Spider stopped his humming to inform them.

They did not need to ask what he meant, for no sooner had Varys finished speaking, the tunnel began to twist around itself like a spiral. It did indeed make Ned dizzy as he kept his hand on wall to his left, the downwards slope was at angle that was just enough to prevent one from slipping, but it did little to allow them to control their speed.

He could hear Barristan’s armour clinking loudly each time it hit the walls around them. The man cursed more than once and Ned would have joined him, were he not afraid of opening his mouth as the dizziness only grew.
“Slowly,” Lord Varys said as the ground levelled out and Ned teetered forwards on wobbly legs. The darkness was not absolute, he could make out a light ahead even as the world continued to spin.

“Here we are, my lord,” Varys announced as they entered the room at the end of the tunnel.

They were standing in a circular chamber which contained six doorways, including the one they had just walked through. The other five were barred by wrought-iron gates, he found it strange that the passage they had come through was not barred. He looked back at it and saw that it was because the gate was already open, he had not noticed the hinges in his dizzied state.

The chamber was surprisingly warm, which he attributed to the brazier that was shaped like a dragon’s head. The coals that were burning in the gaping mouth looked like molten gold.

It was the mural on the floor that quickly became the focus of Ned’s attention.

It was the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, fashioned in red and black tiles. The dancing light of the fire made it look as if the dragon was moving.

“I do not understand,” He said to Lord Varys. “This is merely some artwork on the floor.”

“This is the only mural, or mosaic, of a dragon that I know of in the Red Keep, Lord Stark.” Varys answered. “I assure you; I know the Red Keep better than anyone.”

“Ser Barristan,” He turned to the Kingsguard. “Did Rhaegar ever speak of this place? Or any other with a dragon mural?”

“No, Lord Stark,” The knight replied, casting his eyes on the art beneath their feet. “He often said the dragon must have three heads, but he did not tell me of any art he commissioned. Besides,” He looked more closely at the mosaic. “This looks far older than anything Rhaegar could have commissioned, my lord.”

He was right about that. The mosaic was scuffed, no doubt because of how many boots had walked over it since it had been finished. His heart sank. It was clear that this place was a secret, but not secret enough judging by the lit fire and clear evidence of the many who had walked on the dragon.

‘If whatever Jon needs is not here, then where is it?’ He asked, casting his eyes around the room to ensure he had not missed anything. ‘How can a simple mosaic help protect Jon’s body from his own power?’

All power has a cost, Eddard Stark. The power to keep it in check is no different.

It was that voice again, the one that had seized him with a fiery hand to prevent him from telling Robert the truth. He felt it in his mind as clearly as he did the voices of the Old Gods.

He held up a hand to indicate his companions should not disturb him, before he attempted to communicate with this new voice.

‘Are you one of the Old Gods?’ He asked. ‘Is what Jon needs here?’

Once, but no longer. What you seek is here, yes. As I said, however, there is a cost to retrieving it.

‘What is it? I will pay it if I must.’ He swore to the strange voice. ‘Tell me what I must do.’

Focus on the head of the middle dragon, child.
He bent down and did as the voice instructed him. It did not appear to be different from the other two heads on the floor, the workmanship was flawless, but he could not make out any distinguishing features.

‘There is nothing here,’ He said as he continued to rake his eyes over the middle head. ‘It is the same as the others.’

*If sight was all that was needed, the secrets of this place would have been found centuries ago. I said focus, not merely look.*

He could not help but feel a little embarrassed at the scolding tone of the former God. He peered more closely at the head of the middle dragon, before placing his hand on the ground and feeling around.

It took him almost a couple of minutes before he felt it.

A subtle, almost imperceptible imprint of a hand was laid in the tiles. As Ned placed his own hand into the slight depression, it looked as if he was petting the middle dragon head.

‘This is it! I can feel it,’ He exclaimed in his head as he felt the slight hum through the floor. ‘What now?’

*Now, you must pay for the power you wish to claim. Are you willing to do so, child?*

‘Yes, what must I offer?’ He could not think what he could give to a God.

*Fire is life for a dragon. If a dragon is to move, it must have life. Give life to it, Eddard Stark.*

He heard the voice not just in his head that time, but also from the brazier that was shaped like a dragon’s head.

He looked at the glowing flames within the dragon’s mouth, he had a feeling he knew what he must do, and he was terrified.

The depression in the dragon’s head was in the exact shape of a hand. That was no accident, neither was the brazier that had been placed in the room not three feet away from the mosaic.

‘Is there no other way?’ He pleaded with the voice. He was afraid of what he must do.

*Of course, leave this chamber. Hope that another will pay the price you will not. Pray that it will happen before my champion expires.*

‘Who are you?’ He asked, wanting something to distract his mind as he prepared himself.

*I am R’hllor. The Lord of Light. If you are strong enough to pay the price today, you will hear my story soon enough. Now, what will you do?*

He was reeling from the words of the foreign God. He had heard of the Lord of Light but, being a follower of the Old Gods, he paid the faith no mind.

‘You were once one of the Old Gods?’ He recalled it saying as much.

*As I said, you will hear my story if you are strong enough here and now. You must decide, Eddard Stark.*

He looked into the fire, it appeared to burn even hotter as he stared at it. He knew what he needed
to do, but he was scared, despite knowing what it would mean if he did not act.

‘Promise me, Ned.’

He startled as his sister’s voice rippled through him. He swore he would never fail her again, now was the time to honour that promise.

“Lord Varys. Ser Barristan,” He addressed the men who had been watching him silently for quite some time. “I know what must be done. Do not attempt to stop me, this is the only way.”

“Lord Stark, I do not—” Barristan began.

“Are you certain of this—” Varys said slowly.

“Enough!” Ned said forcefully. “I must do this.”

He closed the distance between himself and the brazier and looked down at it once more. His legs were shaking, and he felt as if his bowels would turn to water as he rolled up the sleeve of his right arm.

“Do not interfere,” He repeated weakly to the men behind him.

He took a few deep breaths, holding his hand over the burning brazier. Before he could stop himself, he plunged his hand into the flames.

The pain was unlike anything he had ever known. He was aware of the scream coming from his mouth, but he did not care how he sounded in that moment. The flames were washing over his hand in a way that felt like he had plunged it into a stream in the Wolfswood; instead of cold water, however, it was blazing fire that was engulfing his hand.

He knew he would not have long before he passed out from the pain, so he pulled his hand from the brazier and threw himself onto the mosaic. He gropped for the imprint on the middle head of the dragon and when he felt it, he pushed down with all his might.

He watched, fascinated despite the pain, as the flames that were devouring his flesh seeped into the tiles on the floor. He hastily rolled off of them, helped by Ser Barristan.

He could not stand, but he watched in awe as the fire spread to each of the tiles, the dragon was ablaze for a few seconds before the flames receded and the entire mosaic turned to ash. It should not have happened so quickly, but where the mosaic of the Targaryen sigil had been only moments before there was now a hole in the floor perhaps a foot deep.

“W-what is in there?” He asked, still unable to stand.

Ser Barristan looked at the spot where the dragon mosaic had been before stepping into the hole and bending down.

“By the Gods, this is—” He started to say but suddenly stopped.

Varys peered over into the hole, but there was no room for him to join Ser Barristan.

“What is that? There is something else, beneath the ash.” He pointed out.

Ser Barristan handed him the object he had lifted from the hole before bending over once more to pick up whatever the second object was.
Ned’s darkening vision was not yet so faded that he did not see what it was Varys now held.

A large egg. A **dragon** egg!

“What is this?” He heard Ser Barristan’s voice gasp.

Ned attempted to shift himself so he could see into the hole, but he did not have the energy to do so.

“How me, please,” he croaked, his throat feeling as if it too had been set ablaze.

Ser Barristan stepped out of the hole and knelt at his side. In his hands he held the strangest object Ned had ever seen.

At first, he thought it was another dragon egg. It was around the same size as the egg in Varys’s hands. As he looked at it more closely, he knew that this was something else entirely.

This was what Jon needed to prevent his own power from consuming his body, he could feel it in his bones.

He tried to focus more on the strange glow it gave off, but it seemed to be growing dimmer by the second.

“Keep it and the egg safe,” he ordered the men in front of him as he lowered his head to the ground. “Jon must—”

He could not finish the words as the darkness filled his vision. He felt his body relax and as he passed into the realm of unconscious minds, he heard the voice of the Lord of Light speak to him.

*You have done well, Eddard Stark. Many would have chosen to spare themselves such pain, even if they knew the world would suffer for their cowardice. Rest for now, we will speak again soon.*

Chapter End Notes

And we have the third head of the dragon!
CATELYN VI

Chapter Summary

Happy new year to you all!

I would like to thank all of you who read this little story of mine :) you've all been incredibly supportive and I enjoy reading your comments!

I wish you all the best!

Almost a year has passed since she last laid eyes upon her husband.

When all of her children were babes, a year seemed like no time at all. When she stopped to consider all that has happened since that night when she learned the truth of Jon, it astounded her just how different things were now.

Even after they had received word of Robert’s death almost two months ago, she knew not when she would next see her husband. Her children asked her incessantly when he would be coming home, but according to the announcement they received he would be remaining in the capital until the King’s Will was ready to be declared.

That was a declaration they were all waiting for, as well as the one they thought would have been made almost immediately after Robert’s death. The reign of King Joffrey had yet to be announced, she was unsure of the leadership of the Seven Kingdoms and she feared for her husband who was in the middle of it all.

Tomorrow, the Tyrells would arrive, and she would meet the man who would take her daughter to wife. She and Sansa had agreed to the match, her eldest daughter was excited to see Highgarden, but Cat was dreading the day she would have to watch her firstborn girl leave home.

She knew Lord Willas was travelling with his grandmother and sister, they had sent a contingent to meet with them to finish the last leg of their journey two days ago. She would have welcomed the opportunity to busy herself with preparations for the Tyrell’s visit, but Robb’s intended has already seen to most of the arrangements.

Robb had obeyed his father’s command to find himself a northern bride, and he wasted no time in negotiating a betrothal with House Manderly. She wished her eldest son could have married for love, but she knew he chose House Manderly due to their wealth and what they could do for the future of House Stark.

Robb accepted the truth of Jon much faster than she expected. He declared for him that night in the woods, and the few times they had been able to speak of it, he made it perfectly clear that he meant what he said.

Wynafryd Manderly was a beautiful girl, she was pleased to see when she arrived in Winterfell. She was also dignified and seemed as if she would make a fine Lady of Winterfell. Cat had been expecting her to need time to get used to her new surroundings, but she had been impressed when the girl asked her if there were any duties she might perform, given that she would be the Lady of
Winterfell one day.

With Wynafryd dealing with the bulk of the preparations for the Tyrell’s arrival, Cat focused her attention on her daughter who would soon be meeting her betrothed. Again, there was not much for her to do in that regard, her daughter was a fine young lady and it warmed her heart to see the beautiful woman she was becoming.

She relished her free time when she could spend it with her children, but she abhorred it when they were in their lessons or, in Robb’s case, carrying out his duties. She would often just sit in her solar, helpless as her mind tormented her with images of an army bearing the Stag banners descending upon Winterfell. Her worst fear, however, was not the forces of her husband’s late friend but the potential danger her nephew could expose them to.

She had been terrified when she laid eyes on the dragon that night. Seeing it coil itself around Jon, she feared that it would crush him in its grip before devouring her firstborn and then herself. She was shocked that Jon was apparently able to control it, but it did nothing to assuage her fears – even when the dragon had flown into the sky, her dread refused to abate. She could admit, however, that it had been a wondrous thing to behold.

The fear she experienced upon seeing the dragon was nothing compared to the terror Jon’s declaration to claim the Iron Throne sent through every part of her being. She attempted to make him see reason, to think of their family and her children, but he would not be deterred. She had no choice but to accept the reality of the situation, therefore she weighed in on the discussion her son and nephew had been having with her own thoughts. She was of the South, after all, she could contribute her knowledge of the southern Houses to the campaign - though she prayed it would not come to that.

A knock at her door had her bounding from her chair, hoping that one of her children had come to help take her mind off of her fears. She felt a stab of disappointment that she could not show as she saw it was merely a servant.

“Beg pardon, Lady Stark,” The man said with a bow. “You have a visitor; he is requesting to speak with you. We asked him to wait in the Great Hall, but he said Lord Stark has tasked him to come straight to you.”

That got her attention. At last, word from her husband.

“You have a visitor; he is requesting to speak with you. We asked him to wait in the Great Hall, but he said Lord Stark has tasked him to come straight to you.”

That got her attention. At last, word from her husband.

“Who is this man? One of Lord Stark’s guards?” She asked the servant.

“No, my lady.” The servant replied quietly. “He is Lord Renly Baratheon.”

She struggled to maintain her composure as she processed the words. She did not see why the late King’s brother would be in her home, especially since she had received no word of his visit.

“Send for my son, Robb, to greet him and instruct them both to join me here,” She said calmly to the servant. “It would not be proper for me to host a Lord who is not my husband on my own.”

“Of course, Lady Stark. It will be done.” The servant bowed once more and hurried off to carry out her orders.

She closed the door as quickly as she could without slamming it.

She wanted to fall apart from the fear she was feeling, but she knew she must maintain her composure until after she had met with Lord Renly. She would not have long to wait, so she would make the most of her time to gather herself.
She crossed the room and walked behind her desk, she took her seat and arranged her skirts as she sat up straight. She was still the Lady of Winterfell; she would not greet such an important guest in her home trembling like a condemned man before the gallows.

‘By the Seven, please do not let my fears be made true,’ She prayed as she waited for the knock that would herald the arrival of her son and Lord Renly.

It came a few minutes later.

“Enter,” She called, pleased to hear how controlled her tone was.

The door opened and her firstborn entered, immediately followed by Lord Renly.

It was as if she was looking at the late King in his prime. Lord Renly was taller than her son, broader as well, but he was not as large as his eldest brother had been.

“Lord Renly,” She stood to greet her guest. “Welcome to Winterfell. I was told my lord husband tasked you with coming here. Might I ask why? Is my husband well?”

“Lady Stark,” The young Stag greeted her with a short bow. “Your husband was well when he sent me here, though he has injured his hand. Do not worry,” He said quickly as both she and her son looked at one another. “The Grandmaester swears there will be no lasting damage.”

“Was he assaulted?” Robb asked, still standing at Lord Renly’s side.

“No, Lord Robb,” He answered. “He said it was an accident and refused to elaborate further.”

“Why did my lord husband send you, Lord Renly?” She asked again, putting her worry aside to focus on the matter at hand.

“My lady,” He began, glancing nervously at her son. “I was told to speak only to you about the reason for my visit. I know it would be improper for us to be alone, but—”

“Whatever my father wishes you to tell my mother, you can say in front of me, my lord.” Her son said in the voice of the Lord of Winterfell.

“He was quite clear with his instructions, Lord Robb,” The young Stag said impatiently. “Wait outside if you must, but I would like to get this over with—”

“My lord,” Catelyn said over him to prevent an argument. “I am sure you are tired from your journey here. Would you prefer to rest before we discuss what it is my lord husband has sent you to tell me?”

“Would that I could, Lady Stark. The seas were kind, but ships offer few comforts.” He was doing his best to remain respectful. “It is a matter of great importance, it,” He looked warily at Robb before he continued. “It concerns the matter Lord Stark revealed to you shortly before he left for the capital.”

She was struggling to prevent her eyebrows from jumping into her hair. She knew exactly what Lord Renly was referring to, but she did not see why Ned would confide it in the brother of the man he feared would learn of Jon the most.

“I have received no word from my husband,” She could not help the note of fear in her voice. “Tell me, is he in chains at this moment?”
“No,” Lord Renly said quickly. “Of course not, he is—” He pursed his lips and looked once more at Robb. “Lady Stark, please, I was told only—”

“If you are referring to the matter I suspect, my son already knows of it.” She said over him. “He can be trusted. You have my word.”

“Jon?” Robb asked, wincing as he realised his mistake.

“Jon?” Renly repeated, a confused look on his face. “Is that his name?” When neither she nor Robb replied he decided to continue. "Lady Stark, your husband sent me here to inform you of events in the capital. Events that cannot be communicated via raven.” He took a seat without asking permission.

“Is he safe?” She demanded. “Did Robert find out?”

“Ned told him on his deathbed.” He said, confirming her worst fear.

She felt the tears running down her face before she was aware of her eyes watering. She dreaded what it was this man was to tell her, she wanted nothing more than to whisk her children away to safety.

“Mother,” Robb said as he walked around the desk and placed a hand upon her shoulder.

“Lady Stark, forgive me,” Renly said quickly. “It was not my intention to upset you.”

“Please, my lord, tell me what it is that my lord husband sent you to say.”

“Very well,” The young Stag took a deep breath before looking at Robb. “Is it safe to speak freely?” He asked, inclining his head at the door behind him.

“Yes, the guards know to remain at the end of the halls and out of earshot. Now,” Robb said. “Please do as my mother asks.”

“Robert and I were hunting; his squire was plying him with wine and Robert reacted poorly when he missed two shots at a boar. He charged it with a knife, ordering myself and Ser Barristan not to intervene. It gored him,” He broke off, no doubt his brother’s death was difficult for him to speak of. “We rushed him back to the Red Keep, but Pycelle could not save him. He sent me to fetch Lord Stark and I did. When we arrived, he sent everyone but Ser Barristan and your husband from the room, he wanted Ser Barristan to bear witness to whatever it was he ordered your husband to write.”

She was not surprised that Robert had sent for Ned during his final hours, despite all that had happened they were still friends. She felt her fear ease a little before remembering that Ned had apparently told Robert the truth.

“I returned after Ser Barristan was sent to fetch Pycelle, we were all waiting in the same room.” He continued. “When I got there, we clearly interrupted an argument between the queen and your husband.”

She looked at Robb upon hearing the words, seeing the fear on his face that matched her own.

“What could they have been arguing about in the chambers of her dying husband?” She wondered, terror threatening to engulf her.

“Robert beckoned me to him, he made me promise that I would uphold his Will,” He looked
uncomfortable. “That no matter how much I disagreed with his decree, I would trust and help your lord husband.”

“What did it say? The King’s Will? We have received no word of it.” Robb said, Cat was unable to ask it herself.

“That is because your father knows it is not safe to announce it in the capital,” Renly answered Robb. “I have seen Robert’s Will. Though it was signed by a dying hand, I recognised it as my brother’s own. Ser Barristan also signed it to verify its authenticity.” He sighed before answering the rest of Robb’s question, a slight frown visible on his face. “In it, Robert renounces his claim to the throne by right of conquest. He restores the Targaryen dynasty, of which he is a blood descendant, and names the last surviving child of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen his heir.”

She grasped the hand Robb still had upon her shoulder. She could hardly believe the words the young Stag had just said.

‘Why would Robert do such a thing? He hated Rhaegar,’ She thought. ‘Ned must have told him the truth when he told him of Jon. Is this Robert’s way of atoning?’

“W-why would he do that?” Robb asked, his hand tight on her shoulder.

“Because your father only confessed the truth to him after my brother told him he knew all along that your aunt was never kidnapped,” Renly said, having the decency to look away from them as they drew closer together.

“But Robert had three children, Joffrey was—” Robb began.

“They are not his.” Renly said flatly. “They are the bastard offspring of Cersei Lannister and an unknown father. That is not common knowledge yet.”

She had no words for what she had just heard. This was all too much to comprehend.

Robert knew all along that Lyanna was never taken against her will.

He named Jon his heir.

His own children were not his but were the bastards of Cersei Lannister and her secret lover.

‘How could all of this have remained hidden for so long?’ She asked herself, before remembering that Jon had been hidden right under her nose.

“Why not tell the whole realm?” Robb asked. “The King’s Will was signed by the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. None could dispute it when a man sworn to defend him put his own signature on the document.”

“Your father knows the Lannisters will not allow the throne to slip from their grasp. Lord Tywin left the capital before I did, after Lord Stark informed a small gathering of lords of his regency. He took the dwarf, Tommen and Myrcella with him, we assume he is headed for Casterly Rock to marshal his forces.”

“But the King’s Will—” Robb protested.

“Won’t mean shit to them,” Renly spoke over him. "Your husband and Ser Barristan planned to leave the capital and meet with Rhaegar's child, Jon as you call him, in the Riverlands, they are likely already with him. Apparently, he has proof of his birth. They will be journeying to
Winterfell, where your father intends to tell the northern lords the truth and announce Robert’s Will. I am here,” He sighed, as if resigning himself. “To fulfil the promise that I made to my dying brother. I will declare for the King as Lord Paramount of the Stormlands.” He looked at Cat. “He also asked me to instruct you to tell your eldest son the truth about Rhaegar and Lyanna and their child, but you have already done that.”

She should feel relieved that Renly would declare the Stormlands for Jon, but all she felt was fear at the thought of Tywin Lannister calling his banners against her family.

She stood from her chair and walked around her desk to begin pacing around her solar. Her mind was too chaotic for her to remain still. She felt the eyes of her son and Lord Renly upon her, but she paid them no mind as she organised her thoughts.

‘Even if the Stormlands side with their Lord Paramount, we will still be outnumbered if the rest of the realm sides with the Lannisters.’ She worked through the possibilities. ‘The North is still an unknown at this point, though if Ned is the one who presents the Will to them, they will not doubt his word. That gives us the North and the Stormlands. Perhaps the Tyrells would side with us? Their heir is to marry the King’s cousin, after all.’

She decided how best to proceed.

“Lord Renly,” She addressed the man first. “How can you be certain the lords of the Stormlands will not flock to your brother, Stannis?”

“Robert appointed me the Lord Paramount, I have ensured my bannermen are loyal to me, Lady Stark. Stannis rules over Dragonstone.” He answered. “I am to return to Storm's End once your husband has declared Robert's Will to the northern lords. Lord Stark told me to call my banners if we get confirmation of the Lannisters doing the same. I will send word to Stannis, but even if he does not join us, once word gets out of a Targaryen restoration, the lords of the Narrow Sea will flock to the Dragon once more.”

She could believe that, she knew some of the Houses sworn to Dragonstone shared the blood of Old Valyria.

“Robb,” She turned to her son. “The lords will be arriving for your wedding in the coming days, use the opportunity to remind them how close Robert and your father were. They may have less reason to doubt the King’s Will, if their friendship is fresh in their minds.”

“Yes, mother,” Robb answered solemnly. “Ser Wylis is already present, I will begin with him.”

“Very good. As for myself,” She took a deep breath before speaking. “When it is safe to do so, I will travel to Riverrun to speak with my lord father. I will convince him to declare for my nephew, Ned can accompany me if need be. I am not certain as to whether or not I can trust Lysa with this, but she will have to be told eventually as the mother of the Lord of the Vale.” She clasped her hands in front of her as she prepared to summarise the situation. “The Stormlands. The North. The Riverlands. And, perhaps, the Reach. As well as the Lords of the Narrow Sea. It might not be all of the Kingdoms, but it will be enough to work with in order to secure the rest of them.”

“It will definitely not be enough to prevent bloodshed, Lady Stark,” Renly answered seriously. “My friend, Ser Loras, accompanied me here. With your leave, perhaps I could tell him and ask that he speaks with his family on the matter? They are arriving tomorrow, no?”

“I cannot give you permission to tell anyone the truth about my nephew, Lord Renly.” She said firmly. “Perhaps you could find a way to gauge his reaction without telling him?”
“I will see,” He looked disappointed. “What are we to do in the meantime? There is no telling how long we must wait for your husband to return.”

“We will carry on as normal,” Catelyn said. “We will greet the Tyrells tomorrow, and will keep up appearances until my husband returns home. Then, we will convene and determine how best to approach the coming months.”

"Your lord husband did not tell me his name, nor even his gender,” Lord Renly said, looking curiously at Catelyn. "How did he hide him all these years? I mean," He laughed a little. "Targaryens have quite a distinctive look I've been told. Has he been in the Riverlands all this time?"

Ned clearly did not trust Renly enough with the whole truth. Perhaps he feared he would not do as Ned instructed, so he did not tell him where Jon was raised nor even that he was called Jon at all.

"I am afraid I cannot answer your questions, my lord," She replied with as much respect as she could. "If my lord husband chose not to divulge the whole truth to you, then I would only be disobeying him by doing so."

"I understand, my lady," He hesitated before continuing. "It is just a lot to take in, Robert hated the Targaryens yet he names one his heir?"

"His hatred for Rhaegar is clearly not as strong as the love he had for Lyanna," She answered, uncertain as to how far he can be trusted.

He merely nodded and said nothing else.

Whatever her thoughts about his sincerity, she knew he was right that chaos would soon be upon the realm. Robert's Will is more likely to divide the Kingdoms, instead of uniting them.

‘At least I know I will see Ned soon,’ She said in an attempt to ease her anxiety. ‘Lord Renly believes he is already with Jon in the Riverlands, it should not take him long to return home.’

She would keep the knowledge close to her heart over the coming days, they already had two of the Kingdoms on their side – hopefully. She would not be completely at ease until she had some guarantee that her children would be safe.

‘If it comes down to it,’ She told herself, suddenly grateful for that which had brought her only terror. ‘We have a dragon on our side. I only hope it is large enough by the time the march of war begins.
ROBB III

Chapter Notes

First post of the new year!

This chapter begins immediately after the previous one.

Apologies if there are any double spaces in between words! I'll fix it up once my new keyboard has arrived!

I'd like to wish you all the very best for 2020! Thank you for reading!

“I cannot believe this.” Mother sighed.

It was just the two of them in her solar now, Lord Renly was being shown to his chambers after agreeing they would not speak of the King’s Will until his father returned.

Robb felt such elation when he learned Jon and father would be returning to Winterfell together. Winterfell was their home, it was where they belonged and finally, after almost a year, they would be back within the walls their ancestors had built to keep them safe.

When he learned that Robert Baratheon had named Jon his heir in his Will, he felt relief for the briefest moment before his mother and Lord Renly reminded him of the reality of the situation. The Lannisters would never surrender the Iron Throne, regardless of what Robert decrees or if Joffrey is actually the bastard son of Cersei and her lover.

Lord Renly told them of the meeting father called with the Small Council and a few select lords, where he informed them of the King’s Will and his own position as regent. None were pleased, but Lord Tywin was the only one who departed – to marshal his forces, Lord Renly suspected.

“The realm should honour the last decree made by Robert,” Robb said to his pale-faced mother. “Whether they agree with it or not, he was still the King.”

"If only it were that simple, Robb. The realm is most likely going to be divided when this news is announced,” Cat said slowly. “Even if they believe Robert's Will, many suffered under the reign of The Mad King. Eighteen years is a long time, but not so long that everyone has forgotten the last time a Targaryen sat the Iron Throne, and the price they paid to depose that monarch.”

“Jon isn’t The Mad King! He was raised by the most honourable man in Westeros and—”

“No, but he is The Mad King’s grandson, and he was raised by the man who would declare the royal children illegitimate whilst proclaiming his own bastard the rightful King.” His mother said over him.

Robb had no answer for that, he knew his lord father would not make up such lies, but the rest of the realm knew him mostly by reputation alone. Robb knew it was naïve to assume that they would believe his words simply because he is well-known for his honour.

“The realm knows that father and Robert were close friends, almost brothers,” He tried a different
angle. “If Ser Barristan himself swears that father speaks true, then surely that will be enough for them.”

His mother looked at him the same way she did when he would come to her with scraped knees as a child – with pity.

“Robb, you may favour me as a Tully, but you are of the North,” She said. “Ser Barristan might have a reputation as an honourable knight, but the moment he declares that your father is telling the truth the realm will remember most of all that he once served the Targaryens, before swearing himself to the man who usurped them. They will see him as just another piece trying to survive in their foul Game.”

“This is not a Game, mother! People will die in—”

“No, it is not but it is the way of the world and has been since well before The Conqueror forged the Seven Kingdoms.” She rose from her seat behind the desk and took the one next to him, placing her hand on his shoulder before continuing. “In the North, the lords say what they mean and do what they say. They have no love for plotting and stabbing their enemies in the back, not because they cannot do so but because they choose not to. The Old Ways have no place in the hearts of the southern lords, most of them anyway.”

“Your father—” Robb began.

“Did not hesitate to marry his daughters to two of the leaders of the rebellion.” She said over her son. “I love my lord father and he did what he thought was right for the realm, but his reasons for doing so were not entirely selfless.”

Robb knew his mother was proud of the family she was born into, to hear her say such a thing about that family was enough for Robb to register the seriousness of the situation.

“So, instead of giving Jon a clear path to the throne and preventing a war, Robert’s Will could harm Jon’s claim and start one?” Robb asked, feeling his spirits drop.

“Yes, it could go that way. It most likely will, if the Lannisters have anything to do with it,” Mother replied in a resigned tone. “Lord Tywin is no fool. He will have started formulating strategies the moment your father informed him of his regency.”

“Lord Renly said he would declare for Jon,” Robb pointed out. “And that the Houses sworn to Dragonstone would back a Targaryen whether Lord Stannis accepts Robert’s Will or not. Sansa’s intended will one day be the Warden of the South. Surely they will declare for the family of his future wife?”

He assumed that his mother had thought of all this already, but he wanted to ensure they were prepared for the eventual backlash that Robert’s Will would cause. He would begin working the northern lords as they arrived for his wedding, no matter what his mother said he could not believe those who knew his lord father best would choose to stand against him. The North had little love and respect for the Targaryens, but even those who had no love for House Stark still respected them.

“I daresay the Tyrells will learn of this the moment they arrive, Robb.” Mother said quietly. “If Lord Renly has not already told Ser Loras the reason he was here, then he might do so when the rest of his family has arrived. Perhaps Ser Loras will figure it out for himself if Lord Renly does as I suggested and tries to gauge his reaction.” She stopped and pursed her lips, clearly thinking hard. “We must be extra courteous to the Tyrells; they are the second wealthiest House in the entire
realm. We will need them if the Lannisters declare war on us.”

“I hope father is back soon,” Robb said as he realised just how tired he felt. “Mother,” He began, suddenly realising. “When are we going to tell Arya and the others the truth about Jon? They should know before the Will is declared; it is only right.”

“We will leave that for your father to decide, Robb,” Mother answered in a strained voice. “We cannot risk them accidentally revealing the truth before he and Jon return to Winterfell. You are right though; they should be told before the rest of the realm learns the truth. The Seven know I was furious to learn your father lied to me all these years.”

Robb thought now was the best time to ask the question he had been wanting to ever since learning of Jon.

“Mother, how do you feel about Jon,” He began slowly. “Now that you know the truth?”

He hoped he had not overstepped, he might be the acting Lord of Winterfell, but she was still his mother.

“Honestly,” She exhaled sharply before answering. “I do not know how to feel, even after all this time. I resented his presence here; he was a reminder that my husband dishonoured me and—” She stopped to look carefully at Robb before continuing. “I was taught that bastards were untrustworthy, born of lust and sin. I feared he would steal your birthright and so I tried my best to ensure that you all kept him at arm’s length,” She smiled sadly. “I was only successful with Sansa.”

“But you know he isn’t a bastard now,” Robb insisted. “Jon would never attempt to steal Winterfell from me, even if he was father’s baseborn son. He is nothing like the way the Seven describe bastards—”

“And I could not let myself see that, Robb. Do not think I felt no guilt for the way I treated him, I am a mother and he was a motherless child; I had to close myself off to those instincts and it grew less difficult as the years went by.” She sighed once more as she looked around the room. “If I knew then, it would have been different. I regret it, but I can do nothing to change the past.”

Robb decided to leave it there for now, his mother had enough to contend with and he did not wish to add to it further. He rose from his seat as he prepared to depart.

“It is late, and we have guests to greet tomorrow,” He placed a comforting hand on his mother’s shoulder. “Father will be back before long. If we are to go to war soon, at least we will all have the chance to be together once more before we must do our duty.”

His mother smiled as she patted his hand and nodded, but he could tell it was not entirely genuine.

“Goodnight, mother,” He said as he made for the door.

“Goodnight, Robb,” She replied.

The last few hours had passed by in a haze for Robb. His mind was reeling from all he learned yesterday.

‘Jon is the King.’ He thought, it still felt unreal even though he had accepted it before he heard of Robert’s Will. ‘That is what matters most.’
It was simple for Robb, though he knew it would not be so for the rest of the realm – even the North.

Until a few months ago, he had known and loved Jon as his brother. That has not changed. His cousin by blood he may be, but he will always be his brother. Robb would be honoured to one day serve as Warden of the North to the good King he knew Jon could become.

He was afraid, of course he was. In his mind, the King’s Will should be honoured and followed to the letter, but both his mother and the late King’s brother made it clear that the Lannisters would not accept the Will of Robert Baratheon.

Robb was shocked that the late King had chosen Jon, the son of the man everyone knew he hated, as his heir ahead of his own children. They were not his children though, if Lord Renly spoke true.

When the servant found him and informed him that the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands had arrived and was requesting to speak with his mother, he feared that somehow Robert had learned the truth of Jon and that Renly was here to carry out justice in the name of the late King. He was beyond relieved when the young Stag told them of the Will that named Jon the King – once the shock had worn off, that is.

He had not slept well at all the night Lord Renly arrived, he tossed and turned for hours before sleep must have claimed him. It was still dark when he awoke and decided to give up on a restful night’s sleep and prepare himself for the day ahead.

He felt conflicted about the visitors they would soon be receiving. Robb had heard nothing but good things about the heir to Highgarden; he knew that if his lord father suggested the betrothal himself, then Lord Willas must be an honourable and good man. Still, he could not help the desire to lock Sansa away in her room so that he could meet with the man himself to determine if he was worthy of his sister. He knew that he could not do that, however, as he was only the acting Lord of Winterfell and his father was still the head of House Stark; it was his right to betroth his daughter to whomever he wished.

‘We all must do our duty when it comes to marriage,’ He thought as his mind went to his own betrothed.

He felt as if the Gods themselves ensured that he received his father’s orders to find a northern bride a day before learning the truth about Jon. When Jon declared his intent to claim the Iron Throne, Robb decided then and there to stand by him. Adding to his belief that the Gods were orchestrating the events, he travelled to White Harbour and arrived there not even a week after learning the truth of Jon. He knew the Manderlys were the richest House in the North, so it seemed only logical that his bride be a daughter of House Manderly.

Lord Wyman was only too happy to accept his proposal. His granddaughter, Wynafryd, appeared at his side so suddenly, it was as if the Merman had summoned her with some kind of magic.

Wynafryd was older than him by almost two years. She was certainly a beautiful young woman and had taken to her new life in Winterfell surprisingly well. She took her future role as the Lady of Winterfell seriously, having already negotiated sharing his mother’s duties with her.

It was Wynafryd who had handled the majority of the preparations for the Tyrell’s visit. He felt quite fortunate to know that his soon-to-be wife was a capable woman, though he knew that by no means gave him permission to lax in his own duties.

His own wedding was less than a moon from today, he hoped that his father and Jon were back in
Winterfell before it came. His mother and Lord Renly made it clear to him that he could not postpone the wedding until his father arrived, because they could not risk anyone knowing that he was returning to Winterfell until he was already here.

The secrecy and politicking was almost lost on him, it wasn’t that he could not follow the intricate ways of ruling, he just wished to be honest and open with his bannermen – as honour demanded.

Still, he could not discount his mother’s advice, she was worried enough as it is without Robb letting his sense of honour potentially endanger his father and, by extension, the rest of House Stark.

‘Jon will be miserable in the South, dealing with all those southern schemers,’ He thought to himself as he made his way to the courtyard where they would receive the Tyrells. ‘He is of the North, just as I am. Perhaps he will be the King to restore honour to the rest of the Kingdoms?’

“Lord Stark,” A servant greeted him as soon as he entered the courtyard. “The Tyrell’s will be here presently. Your family is gathered to meet them, only—”

“I’ll get her,” Robb assured the woman. “I know where she will be. Kindly inform my mother that I will be there soon.”

“Yes, Lord Stark,” The woman bowed and walked away, all of the servants had had the same harried look on their faces these past few days. Robb would find a way to reward them for their diligence, beyond their wages, of course.

He made his way to the deserted training yard, knowing he would find his wild little sister there. He would not be surprised if she had already ruined the dress his mother and Septa Mordane ordered her to wear.

The sound of wood thrashing the straw dummies filled his ears as he found Arya. The dress was not ruined, but there was enough stains on the hem of the dark green fabric that would ensure his mother’s fury.

“Oi,” He greeted her, knowing he could be less formal with his youngest sister. “What are you doing here? Our guests will arrive any moment.”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Arya said without stopping her assault on the dummy. “Why do I need to meet them? It’s not me the Tyrells are marrying. Wait—”

She turned and faced Robb with her Stark features full of suspicion.

‘Here we go,’ He thought, laughing internally.

“There better not be some stupid boy with them thinking he is going to get me as a wife,” She said dangerously. “Is there?”

“I should not say, mother would, hey—” His teasing was rewarded with a sharp poke in the stomach. “There’s no one coming for your hand today, Arya. You’d scare them off anyway,” He laughed as he rubbed his stomach.

“Good. I don’t want to be some fancy lady who sits around knitting all day. I want to be a—”

“Warrior, aye, you’ve said. You know.” He hoped she was not too old for this tactic. “One cannot be a true warrior if one does not do their duty. You know what your duty is right now, don’t you?”
Arya huffed, but he knew he had her there. She threw her training sword on the floor, something Ser Rodrik would have raged at him for doing and proceeded to follow Robb to the rest of their family.

“When will father and Jon be back?” She asked suddenly as they walked.

It felt bad enough having to hide the truth from his bannermen, now he had to do the same with his blood. They all missed father terribly, but it was worse for Arya because she was closest to Jon and he had been gone almost as long as father.

“I am sure they will be back soon, sister.” He said, deciding it was not exactly a lie. “You can thrash them both with your new skills once they have settled in.” He clapped her on the shoulder as he chuckled.

“I can’t wait to show—”

“Arya Stark! Where have you been?” Mother’s voice thundered. “What have you done to your dress, young lady?”

He tried not to laugh as his mother beckoned Arya to her, no doubt to scold her without the servants overhearing.

‘The sooner she accepts Arya will never be Sansa, the better,’ He said to himself fondly.

He took his place at the head of his family and important members of his household. Wynafryd was on his immediate left, whilst her father and mother stood to her left. Lord Renly and his friend, Ser Loras, were next to Wynafryd’s mother.

On his right was his mother. Sansa, Arya, Bran and Rickon were to her right as well.

They waited silently for their guests to arrive; Robb could hear the rumbling of what sounded like an army of carriages.

“Oh, you should have locked them away!” His mother said suddenly.

He was not the only one to grin as his direwolf and those of his siblings appeared in the courtyard. They trotted over to their respective owners and sat at their feet. He had a feeling they were waiting until the last second so their mother could not shoo them away.

‘Clever boy,’ He said as he petted Grey Wind.

His wolf was silent at his feet, but he would turn his head to him if Robb ceased his petting. Lady somehow looked as prim and proper as Sansa as the sound of the carriages grew louder, her eyes fixed on the gate. Nymeria, like her master, appeared to be bored if her frequent attempts to engage Summer in play were anything to go by. He was not sure why, but Bran’s wolf unsettled him a little. He was not violent, but he reflected the changes that Bran had started to show just after his fever struck him. Shaggydog remained still for perhaps the first time ever, Rickon was ignoring the gate entirely and was hugging his direwolf tightly.

He could hear his mother whispering her disapproval but directed his attention to the gate as two riders appeared bearing the Tyrell sigil.

‘Here we go,’ Robb thought to himself as he drew himself up to his full height. ‘Father chose him for Sansa, he will be a good man. He will be a good man.’
He repeated his little mantra to himself over and over as the first carriage appeared.

Only two carriages passed under the gate, but he suspected that many more were outside the walls.

He glanced at his sister and could tell that she was nervous, he assumed that only her desire to be a true lady prevented her from fidgeting. Arya, he could see, was not even looking at the carriages but was instead whispering in Nymeria’s ear.

‘Well, at least she is here,’ He thought to himself as he shook his head and returned his gaze to the carriages.

A servant approached the one on the right and opened the door, placing a mounting block at the foot of said door before stepping back.

A man stepped out awkwardly onto the block, he slowly lowered himself off of the step and turned to offer his hand to the woman stepping out after him.

His first thought was what was Old Nan doing in the Tyrell’s carriage. He realised quickly that this woman, whilst old, had clearly counted less years than the one who had told him stories as a child.

He assumed this was Lord Willas’ grandmother. Once she had descended and her grandson offered his hand to the other member of his family, her eyes raked over the direwolves, he was surprised that she did not appear startled. Her eyebrows shot up when she noticed her grandson, Ser Loras, standing in line with their hosts.

The woman who was being helped down by Lord Willas was a sight to behold. Her brown hair was braided in a way he assumed was common in the South, her kind face wore a smile that did not falter as she too looked at the direwolves with less fear than he expected. Her eyes lit up her face even more when she caught sight of her brother.

Robb straightened himself as the Tyrells walked over to them. He had been told that Lord Willas had sustained an injury in a tourney that hampered his movements, but his face betrayed no discomfort as he hobbled over to them on his walking stick.

His first thought was that he was too old for his sister, even though his father had insisted the actual marriage wait until after Sansa’s sixteenth nameday, Robb still had to work hard to refrain from having Grey Wolf chase him out of Winterfell. He had to represent his family and would not bring any dishonour to House Stark. Also, his mother had made it clear just how powerful of an ally the Tyrells could be to Jon.

“Lord Willas,” He greeted, doing his best to emulate the voice his father used in official proceedings. “I welcome you and your family to Winterfell.”

“Lord Stark,” The heir to Highgarden returned, bowing his head slightly and extending his free hand. Robb gripped it a little harder than was necessary - he was still a big brother, after all.

“You are most welcome, my lord,” He said, releasing the man’s hand and gesturing to his right. “My mother, Lady Catelyn, the Lady of Winterfell.” His mother curtsied as Lord Willas stepped to his right to stand before her.

“Lady Stark, it is a pleasure to meet you.” He gave her a deep bow. “Your lord husband has spoken of you often and fondly. It is clear that he misses you dearly.”
“Thank you, Lord Willas,” His mother replied graciously. “My husband has spoken most highly of you in the correspondence we have shared. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Sansa Stark.”

The old woman smirked as she noticed Robb stiffen as Lord Willas approached Sansa. A part of him hoped that Lady would knock him over, but she was too well behaved for that.

“Lady Sansa,” He said, placing a kiss on the hand Sansa offered. “I have been eager to meet you ever since your father first told me of you. He often spoke of your beauty, though it has done little to prepare me for actually laying eyes upon you.”

“That’s all you’ll be laying on her for a while,’ He growled internally as Sansa curtsied.

“Thank you for your kind words, Lord Willas,” Sansa said with grace. “I too have been awaiting your visit ever since my father informed me of you. I look forward to getting to know one another during your time here, my lord.”

“As do I, Lady Sansa,” He smiled warmly, before surprising them all with his next question. “I assume that this is Lady?” He gestured at the direwolf at Sansa’s feet.

He should have known his father would prepare the Tyrells for meeting the direwolves, that would explain why they had not bolted the moment they laid eyes on them.

“Y-yes, my lord,” Sansa answered, her confusion making her voice less composed. “Did my lord father tell you of her?”

“We encountered your half-brother and his own direwolf on our way here, my lady,” The young Tyrell said, stepping forward with her grandmother.

He shot his mother a look, but she did not meet his eyes. Her own gaze was fixed on the Tyrell women, a smile firmly on her face.

Once again, the old woman smirked at him, he was not sure he was going to like her. He stepped forward as Lord Willas hobbled over to his kin.

“Allow me to introduce my sister, Lady Margaery and my grandmother, Lady Olenna,” Willas said politely. Margaery curtsied but her grandmother merely nodded.

“My ladies,” He said. “Be welcome to Winterfell. Allow me to introduce the rest of my family.” He walked past his mother and Sansa and stood before Arya. Grey Wind at his side. “My youngest sister, Lady Arya Stark,” He saw his mother’s lips thin as Arya only nodded at their guests. He moved to Bran quickly. “My brother, Lord Brandon Stark,” Bran, despite how distant he had become still had better manners than Arya as he bowed to their guests. “My youngest brother, Lord Rickon Stark. Rickon,” He whispered as the boy refused to pull his face out of Shaggydog’s fur.

“Apologies, my lord and ladies, he is rather shy.” He said apologetically when he realised Rickon would not budge.

“Allow me to introduce my sister, Lady Margaery and my grandmother, Lady Olenna,” Willas said politely. Margaery curtsied but her grandmother merely nodded.

“My ladies,” He said. “Be welcome to Winterfell. Allow me to introduce the rest of my family.” He walked past his mother and Sansa and stood before Arya. Grey Wind at his side. “My youngest sister, Lady Arya Stark,” He saw his mother’s lips thin as Arya only nodded at their guests. He moved to Bran quickly. “My brother, Lord Brandon Stark,” Bran, despite how distant he had become still had better manners than Arya as he bowed to their guests. “My youngest brother, Lord Rickon Stark. Rickon,” He whispered as the boy refused to pull his face out of Shaggydog’s fur.

“Apologies, my lord and ladies, he is rather shy.” He said apologetically when he realised Rickon would not budge.

“No matter, I am sure we will become friends before long,” The Lady Margaery said sweetly.

He moved back to his mother’s side and this time introduced the people to his left.

“My betrothed, Lady Wynafryd Manderly,” He said with a smile as his intended curtsied to their guests. “Her father, Ser Wylis Manderly and mother, Lady Leona Manderly.”
“My lord. My ladies.” Willas bowed as his sister and grandmother greeted them.

“Lord Renly Baratheon, the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands,” He introduced their surprise guest. “I believe you know the man at his side,” He said after Renly greeted the rest of the Tyrells.

Lord Willas and Lady Margaery went to their brother, but their grandmother remained where she was. She wore a curious expression as she looked over Robb and his mother.

“My dear,” She said, sounding much kinder than he expected as she approached Sansa. “I look forward to the day I may call you my granddaughter,” She held Sansa’s hands in her own. “I am sure you will be very happy in Highgarden. My son regularly hosts balls and tourneys, your half-brother tells me you are quite fond of dancing and singing.”

“Thank you, Lady Olenna,” Sansa said with a blushing smile. “I do love to dance, Jon was right about—” She broke off, looking nervously at their mother. “Thank you once again, my lady.”

“You will be family soon,” The old woman smiled. “Such is my duty and my pleasure. Now,” She said as she released Sansa’s hands and turned to Robb and his mother. “Might we continue our talk inside? It has been a long and interesting journey.”

“Of course, my lady,” He said, offering her his arm and leading the procession into the Great Hall.

‘Father, I hope you return soon,’ He prayed as he entered the Great Hall with the rest of his guests behind him. ‘I’ll fling myself off the broken tower if I must deal with this pomp again.’
The first scene of this chapter takes place immediately after Tyrion's previous one.

The scenes after it take place in the present time (2 months after Robert's death).

Tyrion was no stranger to broken wine glasses, so he always ensures that he has not one but two spares to hand. He seized one of those spares and filled it with wine from the pitcher, taking care to sip it as he eyed the eunuch over the rim of the glass.

Varys merely returned his look, that almost vacant smile still upon his face. After placing the glass back on the table, Tyrion realised that Varys was not going to be the one to speak first.

“Why do you wish to discuss such things with me, Lord Varys? You would be better served speaking with my father,” He said carefully.

Varys huffed before reaching out for the remaining glass and pouring himself some wine.

‘That had better not be the last of it,’ He thought as the eunuch raised the glass to his lips.

“A fine vintage,” Varys said, smacking his lips as he placed the glass on the table. “I wish to discuss the future of the realm with you for a number of reasons, Lord Tyrion. First, might I ask you a question I believe I already know the answer to?”

Tyrion was no stranger to word games, he enjoyed them to a certain extent, but he was in no mood for one of them right now. He would have to play this one, he knew, because the eunuch was here in his room while the King was dying in the very same castle – and he did not find himself here by accident.

He shrugged in reply to the eunuch, reaching for his wine to wet his throat some more before the wordplay truly began.

“Regardless of your own personal opinion of him, what kind of King do you believe your nephew will make, my lord?”

Well, that was not what he was expecting.

‘A shit one,’ He wanted to say, it was on the very tip of his tongue. He had to be more careful than that, however.

“Why ask a question which you already know the answer to, Lord Varys?”

“Oh,” Varys giggled. “One can never be completely confident that one is correct, my lord. Overestimating oneself can lead to embarrassing situations, such as being scolded for trespassing in the resting place of a Great House.”

“So, you’ve been talking with Lord Stark?”
“Often, my lord. He is a remarkable man,” Varys sounded sincere. “Devoted to his family, just as
your lord father is. Only, your lord father is more concerned with the name of the family, rather
than the people who bear it.”

He was not wrong about that. Lord Tywin always preached of the importance of family, how it
came before everything else and was all that mattered – yet the man had allowed servants to raise
his children.

There was nothing more important to Tywin Lannister than ensuring the legacy of his House.

“Not the only difference between the two, I assure you,” Tyrion said, sipping his wine.

“No, one demanded justice for the murder of a woman and her children,” The eunuch’s voice was
unsettling. “The other was the one who ordered those murders.”

Tyrion knew the rumours of his lord father being the one to order the deaths of Elia Martell and
her children, his own way of getting into Robert’s good graces after remaining neutral throughout
his rebellion. Tyrion also knew his father was capable of such a thing, but he could not believe that
he ordered them to be carried out as brutally as they were.

“That’s quite the accusation to make against the grandfather of the future King,” Tyrion said
slowly.

“Which brings us back to my original question, my lord,” The eunuch’s smile was back on his
face. “What kind of King will young Joffrey be?”

Tyrion hoped Varys had let that one go, but it seemed no amount of words would do that.

“With the right counsel and guidance, anyone can be a good ruler,” He answered. “My nephew will
have both.”

“Having something does not always mean one is prepared to make use of it, my friend,” Varys shot
back. “You will not answer honestly, because you fear I may pass on your answer to Joffrey,
should he become King. There is no—”

“Should?” Tyrion repeated, unable to believe the Master of Whisperers would misspeak in such a
way. “There is no doubt he will become King once Robert passes, he is the heir to the throne.”

“By what right, Lord Tyrion?”

“By—” He was in dangerous waters now, Varys’s words could be considered treasonous. “By
right of blood and birth.”

Varys sat back in his chair and nodded thoughtfully; he was silent for a few seconds before looking
at Tyrion once more.

“Should Daenerys Targaryen arrive on these shores tomorrow and claim the throne by that same
right, would it be a valid claim?”

‘Why are we speaking of the Targaryens?’ He was truly uncomfortable now.

He shook his head, wishing to say as little as possible. For all he knew there was someone standing
just outside of the door, if word got to his sister about the discussion, well, Tyrion would be a head
shorter. After Joffrey has played his games with him, of course.
“And why not?” Lord Varys pressed with a raised eyebrow.

“Robert claimed the throne by right of conquest and ended the blood claim of House Targaryen.”

“Yet it was not Robert and his forces who breached King’s Landing,” Varys said after a brief pause. “Robert killed the crown prince, yes, but it was your brother who killed the reigning monarch. Tell me, why did Robert claim the right of conquest and not your lord father?”

Tyrion knew his father was ambitious, but he preferred to rule from the background. The most power with least public responsibility was the position the true ruler held, something he learned during his time as Hand of the King to Aerys.

No, Tywin would not have claimed the throne for himself, but he would have found some way of releasing Jaime from his vows and putting him on it.

“Because Robert led the war from its beginning and his armies were—”

“Exhausted and depleted, my lord.” Varys cut across him. “It so happens that your lord father did try to claim the throne for House Lannister, without directly declaring it, of course.”

“What?” Tyrion’s curiosity was piqued. His father had never told him this. Jaime had yet to tell him exactly what happened in the throne room that day, but Tyrion knew why he chose to remain silent.

“Your lord father pointed out that with the King and his heir dead, his wife and second son preparing to flee from Dragonstone, there was no one present to directly inherit the throne. He added that Prince Viserys was already showing signs of his father’s instability to give more weight to his words – and he was not wrong there. It was at that point when Lord Stark declared it should pass to Prince Aegon, as he was the rightful heir after Rhaegar’s death,” Varys paused to clear his throat. “That was when your lord father had the brutalised remains on an innocent woman and her blameless children brought before Robert. Now,” Varys leaned forward. “Your father proposed that there be a Great Council to determine the next monarch, but we all knew what he really meant was that there should be a show of a Great Council to elevate House Lannister to royalty.”

Tyrion could not process what the eunuch was saying. It sounded exactly like something his lord father would have done, he could imagine Tywin gathering his bannermen and sending them to buy votes with either gold or threats. His father joined the rebellion at the very end, so his army was fresh. Then why did he not press the issue?

“Well, I am no prince, so whatever my father had planned it did not succeed,” Tyrion said, toasting the eunuch.

“Yes, because Lord Arryn said that Robert’s Targaryen ancestry, his father being The Mad King’s cousin, gave him a blood claim to the throne. That, combined with his right of conquest, forced all the lords present to agree.”

“Then why—”

“Was it not made known to the realm? I assure you; many know of it, but they choose to ignore it because of the relative peace we have had under Robert’s reign.” Varys said over him. “The maesters have recorded it but they agreed that it was best to keep it as quiet as possible, lest the Targaryen loyalists use it to justify putting Viserys on the throne. So, would Daenerys Targaryen’s claim be invalid? Robert sewed his cloak by right of conquest, but it was his blood claim that provided the clasp to keep it on his shoulders.”
Tyrion was not sure how the politics would work, but his nephew was the direct heir of the current King. If Robert held the throne by right of conquest and blood, then would Joffrey inherit it by blood and birth, or would it revert back to the Targaryens?

“Joffrey is still Robert’s son,” Tyrion decided to say just to be safe. “The Mad King’s sons are dead, and his daughter is on the other side of the Narrow Sea. Joffrey is here in the Red Keep and my father and sister will have his arse warm the Iron Throne before Robert’s body is cold.”

“You are not wrong there, my lord. Your sister will do all she can to sit her son on the throne,” Varys replied. He sipped from his wine once more and was silent for a few moments as he stared into the glass. “Though if she could, she would claim it for herself. She has always resented being a woman in a man’s world.”

“How do you know—”

“It is my duty, and burden, to know things, my friend.” Varys rose from his seat and placed his unfinished glass on the table. “I fear I should be going; I will have much to do when the new King is declared. No doubt your father will be quite busy trying to salvage a marriage with the Tyrells.”

“Yes, Cersei was stupid to reject it.” Tyrion said, though he was glad the beautiful Rose of Highgarden would not have to suffer his nephew. “My father will be arranging marriages left and right, I fear.”

“Including your own?”

“Do you know of any highborn ladies who would take me? If so, do offer their names to my father,” He said with a smirk that the eunuch’s next words wiped clean off his face.

“I shall ask around for you, my lord,” He smiled. “I am certain your lord father will approve of your second marriage. After all, a highborn lady is a much better bride than a crofter’s daughter,” Varys turned and opened the door. Looking back at Tyrion with a knowing smirk. “Or was she a whore as your father and brother both claimed her to be? Good day, my lord.”

He stepped through the open doorway and Tyrion managed to shake himself out of his state of shock as the last of his robes disappeared from view.

“Wait!” He demanded, sliding off his chair and bounding for the open door. “How do you know about that, my father—”

He stopped as he looked down each end of the deserted corridor. The eunuch was nowhere to be seen, his disappearance as sudden as his appearance had been.

“How did he know about Tysha?” He asked himself, wincing as the memory he buried deep inside came crashing to the forefront of his mind. ‘Father ensured no one who remembered it would talk.’

He did not linger long on how Varys knew; his attention was soon fixed on what he said about Tysha.

‘A crofter’s daughter,’ He repeated. ‘No, she was a whore. A trick of my brother’s, though well intended. Jaime would not lie to me about such a thing.’

He stormed over to the table and drained the remainder of Varys’s wine, before emptying his own cup and refilling it.

No matter how much he tried, however, he could not drown the doubts and memories that were
taking root in his mind.

“Are you paying attention?”

Tywin’s firm voice snapped Tyrion out of his wandering mind.

‘Curse that eunuch,’ He thought for the thousandth time.

The conversation he had had with the enigmatic Master of Whisperers was still fresh in his mind, even two months after the meeting had occurred. He had intended to confront his brother about the supposed crofter’s daughter he had married, but his lord father spirited Tyrion away the very next day. He knew better than to ask Tywin, his only answer would be a cold glare much fiercer than the one he was receiving now.

He wished he had some trail to follow, but his father had ensured all of the loose ends were well-tied. The Septon who married Tyrion and Tysha had long since disappeared, Tyrion could not risk his lord father knowing he was asking questions about a matter he considered resolved, so he tried to reassure himself the eunuch had been lying.

“Tyrion! Your lord father is speaking to you!”

His uncle’s voice, much less controlled than his brother’s own, brought him fully back to the present moment. He looked at his father’s cold face for a few seconds before truly seeing it.

“Apologies,” He said, certain he did not sound sorry at all. “Last night was a rather late one.”

“It will be the last one you will have for some time,” Tywin answered flatly.

“If I had known that, I would have shown less restraint,” He shot back, knowing he shouldn’t anger his father any further, but feeling the need to vent his frustration somehow. “It seems I must inform my good friends at—”

“That is enough.” Tywin cut him off. “We are not here to discuss how you shame the Lannister name with your debauchery. We are here to ensure we are prepared for when Robert’s Will is announced.”

Tyrion merely shrugged. He was not glad to be in his father’s company so often, but he could not deny that he felt somewhat pleased knowing his father considered him important enough to be privy to some of his plans.

“I’d say you are as prepared as you will ever be,” Tyrion said to his father. “You have been gathering your forces ever since we arrived here. You have already decided to march on the capital should the contents of Robert’s Will not be to your liking. What I cannot fathom, however, is why you are worried about—”

His father raised a hand to halt his speech, he turned his gaze to the map on the table before them as he began to speak.

“Lord Stark was serving as Hand of the King to Robert when he died. The very next morning he announced himself as regent, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and the Master of Laws both swore that Lord Stark was appointed as such by Robert.” Tywin’s gaze moved from the map to the two men before him. “When you take into account that Robert, allegedly, decreed that Stark would announce his Will at a time he himself deems appropriate, Lord Stark has more political power than any other man in the Seven Kingdoms until Joffrey is crowned.”
“He has not yet been crowned, though,” Kevan said, leaning forward. “It has been two whole months since Robert’s death, and we have heard nothing from the capital.”

That much was true. Tyrion assumed his sister would send enough ravens to blot out the sky around Casterly Rock, but they had received none.

This was not exclusively an issue of King’s Landing, however, as his father immediately sent out ravens of his own upon reaching Casterly Rock. He had received no replies to those ravens, which was not something he was used to.

The first raven he sent was to Highgarden. He offered his apologies for the refusal of Lord Mace’s first proposal to wed his daughter to Joffrey. He ended that letter with generous terms should Lord Mace reconsider the offer. That was almost a month ago and they had heard nothing back.

The second and third ravens he sent were concerning the betrothals of his younger grandson and granddaughter. It was the reason he brought Tommen and Myrcella with him, much to the fury of their mother.

He offered Tommen to Stannis Baratheon’s daughter, Shireen. He proposed a marriage between Doran Martell’s youngest son, Trystane, and Myrcella. Both ravens went unanswered.

The lack of reply from Dragonstone was not surprising; no one has heard from Stannis since he left the capital around the time of Jon Arryn’s death. Tywin had been expecting the Martells to demand much and more should they accept the betrothal, but as with Highgarden they received no reply.

This left Tywin furious, in his own silent way, but Tyrion was relieved his niece and nephew were not going to be sold like cattle.

“That is concerning, but those two months have allowed us to marshal our forces without the rest of the realm noticing,” Tywin answered his brother. “When Robert’s Will is announced, we shall ride for the capital either to swear fealty to Joffrey, or to foil whatever play Eddard Stark might make for the throne.”

“You said the day of Robert’s death that you do not believe Stark wants—” Tyrion began.

“And I still do not believe Stark wants the throne for himself,” Tywin cut across him. “That does not mean he wants Joffrey to be the one who ascends.”

“Joffrey is the heir,” Kevan said flatly. “By right of blood and birth the throne is his.”

‘By right of blood and birth,’ Tyrion repeated the words in his head, words he had used to defend his nephew’s claim to a member of the Small Council. ‘Could Daenerys Targaryen rightfully claim the throne with the same blood?’

It was strange to think of Joffrey having the blood of Old Valyria running through his veins, he was all Lannister. There was no trace of his father, not in his golden hair or green eyes, not in any of his features. Robert also had the blood of the Dragonlords, but he too lacked the typical Valyrian colourings.

“Uncle Kevan has the right of it,” Tyrion said, coming out of his thoughts. “Unless Lord Stark is prepared to commit treason, there is nothing he can do about Joffrey ascending the throne.”

“How if he is able to cast doubts on Joffrey’s legitimacy as Robert’s heir, or,” Tywin’s tone took on a darker tone. “If something should happen to Joffrey.”
Kevan looked appalled but all Tyrion could think was that Lord Stark was not the kind of man to conspire to murder a child—no matter how detestable that child might be.

‘He is not like you, father,’ Tyrion said to himself. ‘He knows there is a line one must draw, whereas you would cross all of them to get what you want.’

He wished his father allowed wine in his study; the images were suddenly flashing through his mind and he had none of his usual remedy at hand.

“You can’t think Stark would kill Joffrey; he is a child.” Tyrion said, attempting to distract himself. “He might not wish to see him on the throne, but that does not mean he wishes to see him dead.”

“He might not, but whomever he is trying to place on the throne would have good reason to wish Joffrey an untimely end.” Tywin shot back. “Why do you think I brought Tommen and Myrcella with us?”

“To use them to secure alliances with—”

“To ensure they are safe should something happen to Joffrey.” Tywin interrupted. “Why do you think Renly Baratheon did not speak out against Lord Stark gaining so much power?”

The question threw Tyrion. He assumed that Renly was backing Stark due to the bond he shared with his older brother.

He shook his head and shrugged.

“We have not heard from Stannis since the death of Jon Arryn,” Tywin began. “He sailed for Dragonstone and has not had any contact with the rest of the realm, at least, as far as we know.” Tywin sipped the water in his cup before continuing. “Renly made no protests to Stark’s position, he and Robert were hardly close so perhaps he is agreeing to back his brother’s friends out of some misplaced guilt for Robert’s death, however,” He paused to fix his brother and son with that unyielding gaze of his. “I believe he considers it in his best interests for Stark to have such power, as it was all a part of their plan.”

“And what plan is that?” Kevan asked, awe in his voice as he watched his brother’s mind at work.

“I believe Stark intends to declare Renly or Stannis as Robert’s lawful heir once he announces his Will.” He replied. “Stark said Robert appointed him regent until his heir was ready to ascend the throne, he did not say he was regent until this heir comes of age, nor did he specifically name him. Now, either Stannis has been silent this past year because he is biding his time on Dragonstone or he is being forced to isolate himself.”

It was hard to picture the grim brother of King Robert being forced to do anything, but the man was ever dutiful. Despite his younger brother being given his rightful position as Lord of Storm’s End, he served as Robert’s Master of Ships. Despite his older brother defiling his marriage bed, he refrained from severing Robert’s cock.

He could not believe Stannis would scheme for a throne that was his nephew’s by right, just as he could not imagine Lord Stark conspiring to usurp his best friend’s children all this time.

“You brought Tommen and Myrcella here because, should something happen to Joffrey.” He tried not to feel excited at the prospect, he was still his kin and a child. Perhaps he was more like Tywin than he thought. “Then Stark and the Baratheon brothers would not be able to claim the throne as Robert’s heirs because his younger children would still be alive, and thus, ahead of them in the line
of succession.” Tyrion summarised.

His father nodded, an odd smirk on his face.

“Why are you so certain that Stannis is involved in the plot at all?” Kevan asked quickly. "That it is not simply Stark and Renly?"

“The betrothals I proposed for Joffrey and Myrcella were genuine,” Tywin said. “The one for Tommen, however, was an attempt to see what might cause Stannis to break his silence. If he merely wanted someone he could control on the throne, then he would have accepted the betrothal and used his daughter to rule through Tommen. Once—”

“He has eliminated Joffrey.” Tyrion said, interrupting his father.

“Yes,” Tywin replied coldly, looking unimpressed. “Since he has refused to reply at all, then I can only assume he is being forced to remain silent, or perhaps his maester is withholding communication without his knowledge, or—”

“Perhaps we have heard no word of Stannis from Dragonstone, because he is not on Dragonstone at all.” Tyrion interrupted his father once more, feeling brave because he was certain he would make a good point.

Fortunately, his father seemed to think the same thing, so he raised a single eyebrow and Tyrion began to elaborate.

“If Stark and the Baratheon brothers are conspiring to take the throne from Joffrey and the children,” He paused to gather his train of thought. “Then they would need support. Stark could not travel the realm unnoticed as Hand of the King and Renly is plenty popular with the smallfolk. Perhaps Stannis has been travelling the realm in secret to gather allies? It would make sense for him to do it if he is in fact involved, since he will most likely be declared King as the elder Baratheon.”

“Not if they are planning to eliminate him and install Renly on the throne.” Tywin countered.

“Robert, his children and his brother,” Tyrion shot back, holding up a finger for each of the people. “All dead within a short amount of time and leaving only Renly to claim the throne. They would have him in chains for kinslaying before he opens his mouth to press his claim. No,” He was sure of his conclusion. “If you have the right of it, that Stark is intending to name Stannis or Renly as the new King, then it would make much more sense for it to be Stannis.”

Tywin nodded slowly, almost absent-mindedly, as he looked at his son.

Tyrion tried not squirm under his gaze but, for the first time, he was certain he saw flickers of pride in his father’s eyes.

“What do you propose we do?” Tywin asked, rendering Tyrion speechless.

As much as he despised his lord father for treating him so unfairly, he could not help the emotion he now felt as he processed his father’s words. He could not forget about Tysha and was determined to have the truth one day, but this day he had his chance to prove himself.

“I think we should begin with Ser Barristan,” Tyrion said, causing both his father and uncle to look surprised.

“Why?” His father challenged, having recovered almost instantly.
“He is the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, sworn to defend the King in all things. Given his reputation as a man of honour and a true knight, few would question his word if he swore that Stark was speaking true,” Tyrion raised his own cup of water to his lips and sipped it, not even caring that it was not wine in that moment. “Casting doubt on his reputation would be a good step to take, as well as discrediting whatever Stark and the Baratheon brothers intend to use to remove the children from the line of succession,” He paused once more, this time considering. “I cannot believe Stark would condone the murder of children, so, if Renly and Stannis are indeed planning for them then Stark is not in the know. We can use that.”

Tyrion fell silent as his lord father processed his words; he could almost see his mind working through the best strategies. His uncle was staring intently at the map, focused on Dragonstone.

“Kevan,” He turned to his brother. “You will prepare the men to march at dawn. We will ride for the capital and prevent Stark and Renly from carrying out their plan, we shall not accuse them directly, however. We shall announce that we believe there is a plot against Joffrey’s life and that we are there to ensure no harm comes to him. Go.”

“At once, brother.” Kevan shot to his feet and nodded at Tywin before heading out of the room.

“You,” He said to Tyrion. “You will remain here and await further instructions. I will send word once we have established ourselves in the capital. Say nothing of this to Tommen and Myrcella. Should the Tyrells or the Martells respond to our offers of betrothals, you are to forward them to me at once. Do you understand?”

“You’re leaving me in charge of—”

“I am,” His father cut him off, knowing what he was about to ask. “Do not make me regret it. Should I return here to find you have turned it into your own personal whore house, you will be very sorry. On the other hand,” He fixed Tyrion with a calculating gaze. “Should I return here and find you have done a worthy job of managing Casterly Rock, I might reconsider your position within this family.”

Tyrion could feel his eyes widen as he listened to his father. He did not say it outright, his pride would not let him, but Tyrion knew what he meant.

‘He will finally acknowledge me as his heir,’ He was giddy as he fought to maintain composure.

He was the heir to Casterly Rock by all the laws of man, but his father had never once openly acknowledged it. It was merely a formality, but one Tyrion would greatly appreciate, having been told he was a stain upon the Lannisters for merely existing.

“I will not let you down, father,” He said, feeling less hatred for the man than he could ever remember. “I will not—”

“Go.” Tywin cut him off.

He slipped from his chair, unaffected by the abrupt dismissal, there was only so much affection he could expect from his father after all.

* *

Tyrion’s good mood kept his mind free of worry and puzzling over the eunuch’s words for the rest of that day. He supped with Tommen and Myrcella, happily telling them stories of his and Jaime’s exploits as children.
When the time came to retire for the night, Tyrion chose not to order the servants to ensure he had an ample supply of wine to last the night. He would need to get used to keeping a clear head, since he would be in charge of the Rock and his young niece and nephew whilst his father was away.

He climbed into bed feeling much happier than he had been when he crawled out of it earlier that day.

All that changed when sleep claimed him, and he was plunged once more into the nightmare.

He and Tysha were abed, their child nestled between them. His mother was beautiful, but the boy was the most precious thing he had ever seen; he had the Lannister's features but none of Tyrion's deformities.

He happily gurgled, waving a chubby fist at each of his parents as they cooed over him. Tyrion felt his body tremble with joy as he chuckled at his son’s babbling.

Then, as with every other time he was subjected to this dream, his moment of perfection was ruined.

The door to their room exploded as the gargantuan form of Gregor Clegane burst through.

He crossed to the bed and seized Tyrion’s son by the leg, swinging him into the wall above their headboard so hard, his head exploded in a shower of silver coins. He tossed his son’s headless corpse aside as if it were a useless sack and seized a screaming Tysha.

Tyrion made to rise from the bed, powerless to help her but intent on trying, but he was held down by a thousand golden hands. They held his eyes open and forced him to watch as Clegane raped Tysha, her screams causing his vision to become distorted. When he was finished, Clegane rose from the floor where he had taken Tysha and brought his massive boot crashing down on her face – silencing her screams as her head also exploded into a pile of silver coins.

He turned to Tyrion; his face impassive as if he hadn’t just committed two vicious murders. He reached for a small purse at his hip and upended it over Tyrion’s head.

His father’s voice reverberated off the walls as the golden coins cascaded over his head.

“Gold, because a Lannister is worth more. Even the lowest of them.”

He shot up in his bed, bile in his throat as he cast his eyes around for the Mountain or the broken corpses of his family. His breath did not ease even when he assured himself that it was all just a dream – as he has done every night since leaving the capital.

“Damn that fucking eunuch,” He spat into the darkness.
It had taken them almost a day to decide their next move.

Margaery did not contribute much to the discussion, she barely heard Willas and grandmother as they attempted to determine the best course of action. She was still in a state of shock.

It all made sense to her now, as she thought about Lord Stark’s words and the meeting she had almost stumbled upon in Highgarden. What she could not figure out, however, was how did Lord Stark know that they would meet Jon at all?

‘It was masterfully done,’ She admitted as her mind retraced it all. ‘The man grandmother met with piqued her curiosity, knowing that she would not let it go. The Stark sigil made it clear they were involved in some capacity. Lord Stark’s description of his bastard son, as well as his answer to Senna’s question, gave me the biggest clue. Though it would not have allowed grandmother to figure it out had we not met Jon. Did they orchestrate that as well?’

“Margaery! Are you listening to me?”

Her grandmother’s voice pierced through her thoughts. She blinked a few times before she took note of Olenna and Willas looking at her expectantly.

“I’m sorry, what?” She asked.

Grandmother rolled her eyes as Willas answered her.

“We have decided it best to continue to Winterfell, Marge. We have no idea where Lord Stark is meeting with Jon, but we do know that they will both be returning to Winterfell.”

She nodded, it made sense. If they turned back to follow Jon then they would risk offending the Starks by arriving much later than expected; Jon had not mentioned where he was meeting with Lord Stark, after all.

“What do we do when we get there?” She asked, she had not been following the conversation.

Grandmother sighed before answering. “Lord Stark kept this secret for almost twenty years. We do not know if he told any of his family, so we cannot risk revealing that we know. If we arrive there and tell the Lady of Winterfell that the bastard her husband foisted upon her is actually the rightful King, she would not react well if she did not already know.”

“Well, he is a bastard,” Willas pointed out. “Just not the bastard son of her husband.”

“What did I tell you my friend told me in Highgarden?” Olenna asked Willas.

“That Rhaegar Targaryen has a child yet living.” Willas answered quickly.

“No,” Grandmother said with another roll of her eyes. “I told you that that was the conclusion I came to. My visitor told me that there was another with a stronger claim to the throne than Viserys Targaryen. Tell me,” She shifted in her seat. “Would a bastard son have a stronger claim than his father’s trueborn brother?”
“Rhaegar was already—” Willas began.

“Yes, but it would not be the first time a Targaryen took a second wife,” Grandmother interrupted him.

“The Faith would never give their—” He tried again.

“How many knights make up the Kingsguard?” Grandmother cut him off once more.

“Seven,” Willas answered with a frown. “What does that have to do with Rhaegar taking a second wife?”


“What is your point?” Margaery asked, this had her attention.

“Selmy and the Kingslayer went over to Robert.” She lowered two fingers. “Darry and Martell died on the Trident.” Two more down. “Where were the other three?”

They had heard conflicting rumours about the location of the three remaining members of the Targaryen Kingsguard. The most common was that they had spirited Viserys and Daenerys away before Stannis took Dragonstone.

“With the queen on Dragonstone, before taking her remaining children to Essos?” Willas ventured as if hearing Margaery’s thoughts.

“If they were then Viserys would still be alive, or both he and Daenerys would have died at the same time. No,” Olenna shook her head with a smile. “Rhaegar was nowhere to be found until the end of the rebellion. My guess is that they were with him and Lyanna Stark, wherever that was.” She looked at her grandchildren before continuing. “Regardless of what Rhaegar ordered them to do, once word reached them of the deaths of Aerys, Rhaegar and his children, they would have been bound to present themselves to Viserys, unless…” She trailed off, looking expectantly at each of her grandchildren.

“They were guarding Rhaegar’s second wife because she was carrying his child. That child would be above Viserys in the line of succession.” Margaery answered quickly. “If they were not married, then the Kingsguard would have had to swear themselves to Viserys whether she was pregnant or not.”

The smile Olenna bestowed upon her told Margaery her grandmother thought the same.

“Then why would Rhaegar and Lyanna allow the realm to believe he kidnapped her?” Willas demanded.

He had a point there. The King’s brutal murder of a Lord Paramount and his heir may have been the true cause of the rebellion, but Rickard and Brandon Stark would not have been in the capital at all had it not been for Rhaegar taking Lyanna.

“We shall have to ask Lord Stark that question, my dear. Do you think he would be able to raise the product of his sister’s rape alongside his own children?” Grandmother asked Willas.

“Lord Stark is a good man; he would not have condemned an innocent child for—”
“No, he would not. He would have ensured that the babe was cared for, that much is true,” Olenna said. “But he chose to sacrifice his precious honour to hide the child in plain sight. We could argue this for hours,” Grandmother huffed. “What matters is that we have found Rhaegar’s last living child and his uncle was serving as Hand of the King when said King died, add to—”

“You cannot believe Lord Stark had a hand in his best—”

“Of course, I don’t, you fool!” Grandmother spat. “If he intended for Snow to be King, why did he hide him in the first place? We have heard nothing of Joffrey ascending the throne, in fact, we have heard nothing from the capital since the King’s death was announced.”

That was true. The ravens and messengers were sent to every corner of the realm with news of the King’s death. They also carried the message that the King had dictated his Will to the Hand and that it would be made known at a later date.

The fact that the rightful heir to the Targaryen dynasty was on his way to meet with his uncle, the Hand of the King, when the King’s own heir had yet to be declared the new monarch could not be a coincidence.

“What are we going to do?” She asked her grandmother and brother.

“We will find some excuse to intrude upon the hospitality of the Starks until their lord and Snow have returned,” Her grandmother said, looking pointedly at Willas. “Your leg often troubles you during the cold weather, no?” She smirked before continuing to tell them the plan. “We will talk with Lord Stark and Snow and tell them that we know the truth and then we will learn if they intend to press Snow’s claim to the throne.”

“And when will we offer my hand to Jon?” She asked, knowing that her grandmother was already planning to do so.

“As soon as we know that they intend to claim the throne and, more importantly, that theirs will be the winning side.” Olenna answered without hesitation.

‘He is not Joffrey, that much is clear.’ She thought as she remembered the man she had met.

She considered him to be quite handsome and she had not missed that he respectfully looked away when Willas struggled in front of him – Joffrey would have mocked him without mercy. Still, she was not a foolish maiden who would fall for a man the first time she met him.

She would get to know him better, one way or the other, though she would not need to think about it until grandmother has determined that theirs would be the winning side.

The North was indeed a beautiful land. She felt as if they had crossed into another world entirely after they emerged from the causeway of the Neck.

Her breath hitched when she saw the ruins of Moat Cailin. She could tell that it would have been a formidable fortress before the ravages of time reduced it to its current state.

They encountered few castles after Moat Cailin, grandmother insisted that they spend their nights in tents in order to avoid a potential repeat of what occurred during their stay at the Twins. They had intended to spend only one night in the halls of House Frey, but one night became three as the Lord of the Crossing continued to offer up his sons and daughters for Willas and herself; it took grandmother’s unbridled fury to convince the old lord that it would not be happening. They were all but thrown out of the Twins within the hour.
It took all of her effort to gracefully reject the advances of the seemingly endless horde of Frey men, her patience was wearing thin by the time grandmother announced they were well and truly finished there.

Senna was not spared the attention of the Frey men, she got it much worse than Margaery since she had no powerful family name to protect her. Fortunately, grandmother had sent Left to watch over Senna on the second day, or was it Right? At any rate, the sight of a towering man was enough to deter the rather sickly looking Frey men from their ill intentions.

She still had yet to determine the capacity in which Senna would serve her. Truth be told, she considered her more of a friend, but grandmother made it clear she would not become an adopted daughter of House Tyrell. She planned to introduce her to the Starks as her handmaiden, but she was at a loss when it came to explaining Flynn. She could only hope the acting Lord of Winterfell would be as taken with the babe as his father had been.

At last, they arrived at Winterfell and Margaery would have loved to have seen the castle from afar, but grandmother insisted on keeping the carriage windows shut due to the small town nestled outside the castle walls. She was not one for the smells of communal living.

She had been surprised by the sparseness of the courtyard they were received in. There were no elaborate works of art or banners depicting the glory of the Starks. She had read how large Winterfell was, but if the courtyard and its immediate buildings were any indication – those books had failed to convey just how large the seat of House Stark truly was.

She halted her inspection of the castle as she laid eyes on the line of men and women waiting to greet her family and herself. She glanced at all of them in the first row briefly before intending to settle on the red-haired man who was obviously Lord Robb, but a familiar face caught her attention.

‘Loras!’ She wanted to exclaim and hug her brother, but decorum dictated that she remained composed until introduced. She smiled at her brother and waited for the introductions to be finished.

She looked at each of the direwolves at the feet of the Stark children. She knew instantly that the tall red-haired girl was Sansa, her brother’s intended. The grey wolf at her feet could only be Lady.

To Sansa’s right stood a girl who looked so similar to Lord Stark and Jon Snow, she knew she was looking at Jon’s favourite sister, Arya. As with Sansa, her own grey direwolf was at her feet.

‘Nymeria,’ She recalled Jon telling her the name of Arya’s direwolf.

The two red-haired boys to Arya’s right had to be Bran and Rickon. The smaller of the two had his face buried in the fur of the black direwolf, whereas the other stood rigid with an unfocused expression on his face, his own direwolf had a silvery grey coat compared to the others.

‘Shaggydog and Summer,’ Again recalling Jon’s words. ‘Shaggydog is the one to watch out for. That can only leave Grey Wind.’

She looked at the wolf before her brother’s frame blocked it from view as he greeted Lord Robb. Its fur was also of a different shade of grey to the rest, but that was all she could tell before her view was obscured.

‘At least none of them appear to be larger than Ghost,’ She felt a little relieved at the thought. ‘Although, Shaggydog is not far off.’ She looked at the beast that was allowing the small child to
cling to it. It was an endearing sight to behold.

‘It seems we do not have to wait for Jon and Lord Stark to arrive before things get interesting,’ She thought as she noticed the man standing next to Loras. She had not paid much attention to him once she realised her favourite brother was here. ‘What would the late King’s brother be doing in the home of Lord Stark, I wonder?’

She brought herself out of her thoughts as she took her cue to speak to her future good sister for the first time.

Winterfell’s interior was as plain as its exterior, but Margaery was thankful for the warmth – she needed it after feeling the northern breeze on her flesh.

They were shown to their rooms and informed that a welcoming feast would be held in their honour that evening. Margaery was eager to explore this ancient castle, but she wanted to speak with Loras first and find out what he and Renly were doing here in Winterfell.

They all knew the truth of the relationship between the late King’s brother and her own. None of them judged Loras for it as they all believed, in direct opposition to their faith, that all forms of love were natural and sacred. She was happy for her brother and she had two others who would give her nieces and nephews to play with.

“Lady Margaery,” She heard from behind her, turning and curtsying to the Lady of Winterfell. “My lord husband informed me that you would be travelling here with a young woman and a babe, he instructed that they should have a room close to your own. Did they travel here with you?”

It took her a few moments to register the surprise she felt.

“Yes, Lady Stark,” She said slowly. “I have brought her with me. Forgive me,” As with Lord Stark she felt it best to be honest. “She is not a member of my household, not yet at least, but I could not leave her and her babe in King’s Landing. I understand if you would rather not offer her lodgings now you know the truth, of course.”

“My lord husband informed me of that as well, my lady,” Catelyn answered after a short pause. “He wrote of how your friend’s babe reminded him of holding our own children when they were of a similar age. I will have one of the servants show them to their room, my lady.”

“Thank you, Lady Stark,” She said with a smile. “I assure you that she will be no trouble at all, though—”

“You cannot say the same for the babe,” Lady Stark finished with a fond smile. “I have five children, my lady, I know well enough how they can be at such an age. Winterfell has been the setting for many children’s adventures, one more will not hurt it.”

“I should like to hear of some of those adventures, Lady Stark,” She said with a little laugh. “I look forward to getting to know my future good sister whilst I am here. She is a true beauty.”

Lady Stark’s smile grew as Margaery said those words.

“Perhaps I will tell you a few at the feast tonight, my lady,” She replied warmly. “Forgive me, but I must attend to my duties and prepare for said feast. Until tonight, my lady.”

“Until tonight, Lady Stark,”
She turned and headed for the door she knew to be her brother’s. She knocked twice but entered without invitation. This was her favourite brother, after all.

“You would make a fine northerner with manners like that, sweet sister,” Loras grinned as he stood to embrace her.

“Aye, you might be right,” She said, doing her best attempt to copy the northern brogue. “What are you doing here, Loras? It is a surprise I was not expecting, to say the least.”

“Is that not the very definition of surprise?” Loras replied cheekily. “You are becoming more of a northern fool by the second.”

She slapped him on the arm before moving to sit at the table next to the window.

“Really, though, why are you here?” She asked again.

“Renly asked me to accompany him. He thought I would like to surprise you, Willas and grandmother when you arrived to meet Willas’ intended.” Loras said with a shrug as he joined her at the table.

“And why is Renly here? I would have thought that he would have remained in the capital.”

Loras looked at her knowingly, he was a Tyrell after all and was privy to most of their secrets. Most. He had a habit of being less cautious than the rest of them – besides father, of course.

“I thought it would be grandmother who carried out my interrogation. I should be thankful you are handling it,” He laughed easily as he sat back in his chair.

“Do not assume I will take it easy on you just because you are my favourite brother, Loras,” She said with mock seriousness. “There is still time for—”

“Good, you’re here.” They heard along with the sound of the door opening and closing.

They turned and were met with the Queen of Thorns hobbling into the room.

“I thought I would have to walk around this entire fortress before I found you both,” She rapped Loras on the shoulder and he stood to offer her his seat. “Your brother is with his intended and Lord Robb. Why are you here?” She shot at her youngest grandson.

“Looks like I will not be handling your interrogation after all, dear brother,” Margaery jested as she looked at Loras.

“It seems so—”

“You can play games later,” Olenna cut across them. “Answer the question, Loras.”

Loras might not be a regular attendee of their meetings, but he knew that you answered whatever questions grandmother put to you.

“As I told Margaery, I accompanied Renly here so that I could surprise you all,” He said stiffly.

“You’ve done that, though it surprises me more that Renly is here and not in the capital. Why is that?” Straight to the point as always.

Loras shifted on his feet and would not meet grandmother’s eye. “I do not know,” He said hesitantly, an obvious lie.
Grandmother raised her eyebrows at Loras, giving him that knowing smirk they knew all too well.

“You should just tell her now and spare yourself a headache,” she thought as she watched her brother squirm.

“Renly was not supposed to tell you why he was travelling here, was he?” Olenna asked Loras.

He shook his head, looking like a child who ran out of excuses for his misbehaviour. The pout completed the look.

“But he did.” It was not a question and Loras knew it. He nodded anyway.

“I asked him everyday we were at sea,” he admitted, blushing bright red. “He said it would not be safe until we were in Winterfell. He asked for Lady Stark’s permission to inform me but she refused. Still, he told me last night, but the Starks have no idea that I know.”

“And?” Grandmother snapped, making an effort to remain quiet after hearing Loras’ words.

Loras sighed as he looked up to the ceiling, before casting a glance at Margaery.

She shrugged at him and then grinned when he finally accepted defeat.

“Lord Stark charged Renly to travel here and inform his lady wife of events in the capital,” he said quietly with obvious reluctance.

Margaery knew what to do. She had enough practice, after all.

“What events?” she asked keenly as she leaned forward. “You can’t just say something like that without giving us more, we’re family, Loras.” She pouted mightily, knowing the reaction it would cause in her brother.

‘He may love to joust, but gossip is another passion of his,’ she said to herself as she watched Loras groan in defeat.

“You cannot repeat this to anyone,” he said, attempting to sound serious but diluting the effect with the smile on his face. “I mean it, no one can know.”

“We are not witless, Loras,” Olenna said impatiently. “Your father hasn’t left us enough stupidity to be. Go on, and quietly.”

Loras knelt before the table so that his head was on a level with Margaery and their grandmother.

“The King dictated his Will to Lord Stark a few hours before he died,” he said as grandmother started to tell him they already knew. “The morning after Robert died, Lord Stark convened a meeting with the members of the Small Council and a few lords. He told them that Robert named him regent, and that his Will would be declared when Lord Stark deemed appropriate. The lords protested, Lord Tywin most of all, but Ser Barristan and Renly both swore that Lord Stark was telling the truth.”

That was news to them. They assumed Lord Stark was overseeing the realm until Joffrey was declared King, but they did not hear anything of him being declared regent.

“And then what happened?” Margaery asked.

“Lord Tywin left that same day, taking his youngest son and his younger grandson and granddaughter with him.” He hesitated once more at that point. “You swear you will not tell Renly
that I told you all of this?"

"Yes!" They both hissed, eager to hear the rest. They were not prepared for Loras’ next words.

"The princes and princess are not Robert’s children. They’re Cersei’s bastards with a secret lover —"

"Who told you this?" Olenna said sharply, face alert.

"Renly. Lord Stark, Ser Barristan and Lord Varys told him their suspicions. They asked him if he knew of any Baratheon bastards who were born without black hair and other Baratheon features, but he said no. They showed him a book that recorded his entire line all the way back to Orys Baratheon,” Loras said, pausing for effect before attempting to continue.

"I always thought it odd that they had so little of their father in them,” Grandmother said thoughtfully, interrupting Loras. "This would make sense based on their appearance, but we do not know if this is merely an attempt to prevent Joffrey from claiming the throne."

She could not believe Lord Stark would use such an underhanded tactic to secure the throne for his nephew, but then, he had already declared one trueborn prince a bastard to protect him. Would he do the same to weaken Joffrey’s claim?

"He cannot——" Loras began.

"He might be an honourable man, Loras, but he is a player in the Game, nonetheless.”
Grandmother cut him off, anticipating his argument. "His own children resemble their mother more than their father, the same could be said of them — that only the younger girl is his child and the rest are the result of an affair Lady Stark had. Yes,” She placed her chin on her fist as she stared out of the window. "This explains why we have heard nothing from the capital since Robert’s death, they’ve been trying to determine the truth of Stark’s suspicions before announcing them to —"

"They didn’t present their suspicions to the lords, only to Renly himself. And——"

"Then why has the boy not yet ascended the throne?"

"Because Robert named another his heir in his Will,” Loras said so quietly they barely heard it. "Rhaegar Targaryen had a third child and——"

"Robert named that child his heir?” Olenna asked, her face a picture of disbelief.

"Yes. I do not know their name,” Loras said. "We were interrupted before Renly could tell me and we had to——” He stopped, his face going red. It was clear where Loras and Renly had been when this discussion took place. "We have not been able to discuss it further, Lord Robb and that monster of his are never far away."

Margaery locked eyes with her grandmother, hardly daring to believe it could be true.

"What are we going to do?” She asked her grandmother.

"Wait, as we planned to.” She answered, recovering enough to smirk, at least. "Wait until Snow and Lord Stark arrive."

"Snow?” Loras asked, hearing the name for the first time. “A bastard?”
Olenna laughed loudly before she answered her grandson.

“Oh, he is much more than a bastard. He is, if Renly speaks true, the heir to the Iron Throne. Though, no one is likely to accept it.”

Loras rounded on her with wide eyes and a wider mouth, hecocked his head to the side.

Margaery nodded, answering the silent question.

"No one will accept this," Margaery said, agreeing with her grandmother. "Even they are offered undeniable proof of the royal children being bastards, they'll never believe the claims of a Targaryen without proof."

Grandmother nodded, opening her mouth to reply but Loras beat her to it.

"Lord Stark and Ser Barristan are meeting with him in the Riverlands," He said quickly. "He has proof of his claim, though Renly questions why he could not meet with Lord Stark here."

"If he truly has proof, then it will be enough for certain Targaryen loyalists," Olenna said after consideration. "The rest will likely flock to Stannis rather than have The Mad King's grandson rule over them."

"Wait," Loras said breathlessly. “What if Renly—”

"Stannis is the eldest now that Robert has died," Grandmother shut Loras down. "Unless Renly can produce proof of Stannis being a bastard, he comes before him in the line of succession."

“If we ally with him, we could secure the throne and—”

“And what?” Olenna demanded. “Renly might be popular, but he is no general. Stannis is. Even if the Lords of the Narrow Sea flock to this Targaryen, Stannis may very well have the support of every other Kingdom once proof of Joffrey’s illegitimacy is made known. No,” She said flatly. “We will back whichever side will be the winner. I admit, there is some risk involved but we will play it as safely as possible. That’s final.” Olenna thundered as Loras began to protest.

Loras' pout only grew as grandmother finished speaking. She felt sympathy for him, she suspects he wants Renly to become King so that he might not have to hide his relationship. The Faith would never support a King who condones what they consider to be sin.

Besides, if Renly speaks true then Robert has already chosen his successor - though it will make no difference to the opinions of the lords of the realm. It was still cleverly done, in a way.

‘Lord Stark truly is a greater player in the Game than we anticipated,’ She said to herself with sadness. ‘It appears I was wrong about his honourable conduct; he schemes just as much as the rest of us. How does he intend to prove his claims about Joffrey’s bastardy?’

She had been prepared for the political battlefield of Westeros since she was old enough to read, yet she was only now learning just how many secrets the realm truly had. She dreaded to think what else could be hidden away, ready to be thrust into the light of day as the Great Game continued to be played.

A sharp exhale of breath caused her to turn her attention to Loras.

“Look,” He said, his voice low with awe as his eyes were fixed on the window.
“What is—” Grandmother began to ask, turning in her chair.

Margaery followed their example, quickly seeing what it was that had them captivated.

She could see the people gathered in the courtyard of Winterfell below them all directing their gaze to the skies.

She could not help but shiver as she gazed upon the red slash in the sky, as if some God had drawn blood from the world itself.

Chapter End Notes

Uploads may not be as frequent as they have been... I'm sure my tutors will be waiting to slap me with a tonne of coursework and so I may be a little busier than usual... I remain dedicated to this story, it's quite therapeutic but I just wanted to make you all aware that uploads may slow a little!

Thanks for reading! This is the last of the chapters dedicated solely to the political prep (as I like to call it). I struggle with politics, I admit, I find much more enjoyment writing the mystical elements of this story but the challenge is one I need to overcome to improve!

Any con-crit is welcomed :D
Sorry for the delay in between posts! I had more coursework to wade through than I anticipated... I'm 80% sure Ramsay Bolton has infiltrated the ranks of my tutors... Monsters, I tells ya!

I hope you enjoy this chapter! It feels like a set-up/filler to me but the next few are going to be jammed with progress/action/drama.

I appreciate you all who read this and hope you're all having a great start to 2020!

‘Daeron Targaryen,’ Jon said to himself. ‘That is my name, but she never got the chance to give it to me. So, is it truly mine? Does a name have to be given with a living breath to take hold of someone?’

He read his mother’s letter every night before sleep claimed him, he knew it word for word by now, but each time he glanced over the words she wrote he felt a tangible connection to her.

He knew from the memory the Old Gods had shown him, and the horror that The Great Other had used to try and break him, that he resembled his mother more than he did his father. He had the Stark colouring from his mother, but he also knew that he had parts of his father in his appearance as well. Had he been born with more than Rhaegar’s nose, cheekbones and build, how would his uncle have explained his existence? He could not imagine himself with silver hair and purple eyes; he would have died from Robb’s japes if he had the long, bright hair of his father.

‘Perhaps the Gods made sure that I resembled my mother enough to pass as my uncle’s bastard,’ He thought to himself.

He was sitting against a tree overlooking the God’s Eye, he chose this position because it was mere feet away from where he saw his mother in the vision the Gods granted him. Also, it meant that he could see the ruined castle that was on the opposite shore; he felt a chilling sense of foreboding as he looked upon the damage his ancestor had done with his dragon.

‘I will not use her to melt castles and burn people,’ He resolved, feeling as if the eyes of Harrenhal’s ghosts were boring into him. ‘I have to be better than those who came before me, neither side of my family is wholly innocent.’

He knew that the time was approaching when he would have to reveal himself to the realm, and he was terrified. He thought of his uncle’s certainty that the northern lords would follow him, but he knew it would not be so easy. He would have to prove himself, if they even gave him that chance, and he would always have his father’s and grandfather’s shadows held over him.

He feared the worst would happen, that the North would reject not only Jon, but also the rest of the Starks. Many lost family and friends in the war to overthrow The Mad King, and the lord they followed into that conflict would ask them to battle to place that King’s grandson on the Iron Throne.
Yes, the North would not easily rally to his side and he was not certain how he could convince
them to. He was not certain he was even worthy of it; the same blood that flowed through Aerys’
veins was coursing through Jon’s own, and he was only young, perhaps the madness of his family
did not take hold until one reached their later years?

‘The Young Dragon may very well have become The Mad King, had he lived long enough,’ Jon
tormented himself with the thought. ‘Here I am, his namesake and the grandson of the maddest of
all Targaryens there has ever been.’

He knew that the only way to ensure the realm survived the coming threat was to unite it behind a
single banner, but each time he thought of the conflict his quest for the throne would cause, he did
not see why it had to be his own. Yes, the Gods had made it clear that he was supposed to face this
threat head on, but why must he be a King to do that? Why not as a general or Master of War to
another monarch? Why must he be anything more than a man fighting alongside other men?

He wished the Gods would speak to him, he thought that they would be in his mind all the more
since he was looking upon the Isle of Faces, yet they were silent.

He was eager to see what awaited him on the isle, though he knew that it was not yet time to cross
the lake to set foot on it. His uncle would soon be with him, he knew to wait for him here and he
was not sure how he felt about their upcoming reunion.

He could do not feel anything other than love for the man who raised him, who sacrificed his
honour and risked so much more to see him safe. Yes, Jon resented him for keeping the truth from
him, but what other choice did he have? Was there a better option?

‘It is done,’ He told himself. ‘No amount of thinking about what could have been will change that.
Time moves forward and so must we.’

It was not as if he did not have other things to worry about, things that were a lot more pressing
than why his uncle chose to do what he did.

The fevers that had been with him for some time now were only getting stronger, it reached a point
where they had to spend more time idle than actively moving forward. He was unconscious much
more than he was conscious these past few weeks, it was all he could do to rouse himself to take
nourishment and then return to sleep.

To make it worse, he was no longer able to use his own inner fire, as Melisandre called it, to
cleanse himself of the fever. The first time he used it was the most potent it had ever been. Every
time since that had been less effective until now it just taxed him further and offered no relief.

The fevers themselves had also changed. Sometimes he would feel as if his insides were melting as
he burned from within, other times it was if his heart and lungs had frozen over – those episodes
were more dangerous as he found breathing almost impossible, though they were less frequent than
the burning fevers.

He suspected the reason for this strange malady, as did Melisandre, but he had not given voice to it.

The most worrying aspect of his ailment was how it was affecting Nyx. The dragon had changed
considerably since she hatched, it was strange to think that that was only a few weeks shy of being
a whole year ago, but now the changes were not natural – even he knew that.

When she hatched, the lightning-like veins that covered her body pulsated with purple and white
light, as she grew and began to breathe fire, the white had all but disappeared as red replaced it and
gradually the purple faded as well. He did not see Nyx every night now, for she was often too weak to fly to him and then ensure she was safely hidden during the day.

The last time he saw her, three nights ago now, was the worst he had ever seen her.

The veins along her body were entirely red, though her eyes and the strange jewel-like crest on her head remained purple. She had grown, but not as much as she had during her early months. She would yelp in pain whenever the light running through those veins pulsated and would often just lay wherever they made camp that night, not even noticing the others.

He feared for her life and how we would cope if she died. She was a part of him, after all, that was made clear to him as he saw how her body was reacting to his own sickness. He did not wish her to live because she would be important in the battles to come, no, he wanted her to live because she was his. She was not a weapon to him, or a means of intimidating others into following him.

She was his family.

Ghost, thankfully, had not been affected by Jon’s ailment as Nyx had, but he was clearly distraught at the failing state Jon was in. He rarely left his side, Jon had to compel him to hunt more than once, but he sensed the wolf never ranged far.

“My lord,” Melisandre’s voice reached him. “Garret has returned. He has spotted a large contingent of men perhaps an hour away from our current position.”

“My uncle? Did they wear his colours?” He had already told his companions what to look out for. “The sigil?”

“He did not see any sign of the direwolf sigil or the uniforms you described,” She answered, coming into view as she stood over him. “They carry no banners, my lord.”

Jon grimaced as he looked around the shore of the lake. The trees were sparse and would offer no cover for them, and he did not feel strong enough to make a hasty retreat. His clothing was in a sorry state and Maro told him often how much he looked like shit. Perhaps they would assume he was simply a sick man with no home and leave him be.

They would believe the same of Garret and Maro, though they did not look as sickly as Jon, they too had been travelling for just as long as him – even longer, in fact. Maro would often complain about his ship, how his crew has probably sailed from White Harbour without him. Garret offered no complaints, but Jon made every effort he could to talk with him; he felt incredibly guilty for never asking what the man had left behind to join Melisandre, and by extension, himself.

The Red Woman, most likely through some magic she refused to share, looked as fresh as the day Jon first saw her in the Godswood. Her robes bore no signs of sleeping under the stars, the hem of her robes were not frayed or muddied at all. Her hair was still as bright as her eyes, skin still clear and free from the scratches and insects bites the men had all over their bodies.

‘Lady Catelyn would pay Hodor’s weight in gold to procure such a dress for Arya,’ He chuckled as the thought entered his mind.

He wished more than a few times that his own white fire would clean his clothes for him. Though, in his current state the effort would probably kill him.

“They may mistake me for some poor fellow not long for this world, my lady,” He answered Melisandre. “Should they ask, you are a priestess giving what aid you can to the sick. They may not wish to approach once they get a look at me.”
Melisandre did not reply, she simply stared out over the lake to the island at its centre. They had been camped on the shores of the God’s Eye for two nights now, and she had spent most of that time tending to Jon or gazing at the Isle of Faces.

“They say it was where the First Men and the Children of the Forest made peace with one another,” Jon said, turning his own eyes onto the island. “A face was carved into every tree to bear witness to the Pact. If only men could settle wars with themselves in such a way.”

“Conflict is a flame that all men find hard to smother, my lord,” Melisandre replied, her eyes still on the sacred isle. “Even the gentlest of hearts may yearn for strife at some point in their lives. It need not be war, sometimes a simple disagreement will suffice, only—”

“Pride is yet another flame that burns all men,” Jon finished, knowing her next words. “Wars have been fought for less, I would imagine. Man has called Westeros its home for thousands of years, Essos for however many more before that, yet most of our stories revolve around one war or another. Mine is no exception.” He trailed off.

“Yours is the exception, my lord,” Melisandre said, finally turning to look at him. “When you vanquish The Great Other’s champion, you will end the greatest war man will ever have to wage. That does not mean there will be no wars to follow it, of course there will be, but your own victory may allow those who come after us to one day turn fully from war.”

It was a hopeful outcome; he could not share Melisandre’s certainty that Jon would defeat The Night King. In his current state, he was sure even Joffrey himself would be able to beat him effortlessly. Still, he did not come all this way and learn all that he did just to expire from some magical illness.

“Why did you choose to serve the Lord of Light, my lady?” He never asked her before.

She looked at her feet for a few seconds before answering him.

“It was not my choice, not in the beginning,” She sounded more vulnerable than he had ever heard her. “I was sold to the Temple of the Lord of Light when I was scarcely more than a child. I was a slave.” She clarified as Jon shot her a questioning look.

He felt heat fill his cheeks that had nothing to do with his ailment. He regretted asking her immediately, but he also hated that he had not asked sooner.

‘Two people who have shown me nothing but loyalty and I never thought to ask them about themselves,’ He chided himself, feeling guilty. ‘One loses his wife and child to the birthing bed, and the other was sold as if she was property.’

This, to him, was yet another reason to doubt that he would make a suitable King. His uncle had always welcomed a member of his household to sup with his family at the high table; it could be his steward or one of the household guards or one of the maids. They would break bread with their lord, and he would get to know more about the people he governed over and employed.

Jon was raised by that same man and yet he failed to follow his example, it had been only the four of them, six including Ghost and Nyx, for a whole year now and he was only just learning of the events that shaped them into who they were now.

“I am sorry, my lady, I—” He began, unsure of what to say to the Red Woman but not wishing to remain silent. His words ended when Maro suddenly appeared at Melisandre’s side.

“Jon, those men Garret spotted are minutes away,” He sounded a little out of breath. “They’ve got
none of those fancy banners those lords like, though. What’s the plan?”

“How many are there?” Jon asked, struggling to his feet.

“Fifty, or thereabouts,” Maro shrugged. “More than enough to pitch us dead and naked in there,” He jutted his chin at the lake. “Unless your girl is on her way?”

Maro was the only one who referred to Nyx so casually. It always made Jon laugh, but not this time. He could not risk anyone knowing about her just yet, especially with her being so weak.

He closed his eyes and focused on the connection that was always present. He visualised speeding along a thin, bright string of light until he knew he was sharing the mind of his dragon.

He knew she was asleep when he felt the peace that was upon her, she stirred a little as she registered his presence, but they were close enough now that she did not attempt to take over, as she had during his first few attempts.

‘Rest, girl,’ He said to her soothingly. ‘We’ll see you at nightfall, should you feel strong enough.’

He felt a shot of warmth in acknowledgement and pulled himself back to his own body.

“No,” He answered Maro, opening his eyes. “She’s resting and in no state to be burning anyone. Not that I would want her to and—”

“What’s the use in having a dragon if you’re not going to use it?” Maro asked, annoyed as always. “The arse of some cutthroat is not the kind of meat I want to smell burning, but if they decide to attack then we’re—”

“They will not attack,” Melisandre said, her eyes looking in the direction Maro had come from.

“How do you know?” Jon asked, turning to follow her gaze and receiving his answer.

The host that Garret had spotted was almost upon them. They wore no colours nor displayed any banners, just as he’d been told. No, there was no Stark direwolf banners to announce their presence, but he knew whose host he was looking at as he took note of the living, breathing direwolf that was keeping pace with two horses at the head of the contingent.

Excitement, nervousness and confusion welled up within him as the men in front halted and he heard his uncle’s voice but could not make out the words as his mind was focused on what he should say.

‘He did what he thought was right,’ A more reasonable voice said in his mind.

‘He did just enough to keep his promise but did so much more for his friend,’ Another voice shot back, this one sounding much more aggressive.

‘Enough,’ He said, feeling afraid. It was all he could do to not think of this as the first sign of the madness that plagued his family.

He focused on the approaching form of his uncle; he was not dressed in a way befitting the Lord of Winterfell. He noticed that his right hand was bandaged and, as he dismounted and walked over to him, he saw just how tired his face looked.

He began to close the distance himself, ignoring the unsteady feeling in his legs as he did so. He ran a hand through Ghost’s fur as the wolf padded over to him, falling into step beside him.
He stopped at the same time his uncle did; Ned Stark looked nervous and concerned and Jon was sure he had the same expression on his face as well. He had imagined this moment playing out a thousand times in his head, yet none of them felt right now that he was looking at the man who had raised him and protected him more completely than he ever knew.

It was when Ghost nudged his shoulder that he closed the remaining few feet between him. He threw his arms around the Lord of Winterfell and felt a sense of peace as he registered his uncle’s own around him.

“Father,” He said, as he closed his eyes to savour the moment. It felt only right to call him as he just did; he may not have been the man to give him life, but he was the one who did the most to ensure he had one.

He did not hear the word Ned said in reply to his own, it was as if he felt it deep within his spirit.

“Son.”

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