A Jade Dragon

by bykim0120

Summary
Having been made aware of who he is, Jon Snow aka Daeron Targaryen goes East and is shipwrecked in Yi-Ti. However, he's not alone and here, Jon will find himself in the midst of a new land with a new people and new dangers. At the same time, he is very aware of the danger beyond the Wall must eventually return, bringing all of the help he can get to face the forces of the Long Night.

Notes

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Ep6, why did they have to make Jon so stupid? And with all due respect to Bran, HE DIDN'T DO SHIT TO BECOME KING! If anything, he seems like the bad guy since his response to Tyrion's offer makes me wonder if the Three-Eyed Raven wanted everyone to kill each other so that no one stood in his way. Regardless, HBO and D&D just shredded a great show into tiny little pieces and there's no hope in reassembling them. For House of the Dragon, I was initially excited but then remembered that the ending would be the same, so I decided "Fuck em."

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To the actual story, this is one of those Jon goes to Essos fics, but Jon goes to Yi-Ti, and he's not alone. I hope this is a good first attempt at a canon fic.

Without ado, here we go!
Onward to the East!

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

(For those curious as to what Jon would look like in Yi-Tish armor, here is a close representation of it: https://www.deviantart.com/p154/art/Jon-Snow-Japan-Version-701867234)

Jon leaned against the wooden wall of his cell, his legs tucked against his chest and forehead...
resting on his knees, as the idleness of his current circumstances made him go mad. He thought about the times he spent in the training yard as he sparred with Robb and Ser Rodrik providing instruction, the time he spent training Bran on the bow before his fall from that tower, and the excursions he took in the wolfswood, the last one where he found Ghost and the direwolf litter.

Jon hated being idle, even more because Lady Catelyn imposed so many restrictions on what he could do and where he could be in Winterfell. Even Theon was allowed more freedom of movement in the castle and the grounds despite being a hostage, and such forced idleness was part of what motivated Jon to travel to Castle Black and become a brother of the Night’s Watch. At least, he would have been with his uncle Benjen and the Watch would give him plenty to do at the Wall.

But such plans were not meant to be. Before he could take his vows, Jon was called to the solar of Maester Aemon, who he learned was Aemon Targaryen, son of King Maekar the first of his name. What he and Benjen had to say made him hesitate to carry on his vows before the weirwood and he found a ship at Eastwatch that took him eastwards. Now, Jon was stuck in a wooden cage within a stone castle in a foreign land after gods knew how many moons he spent traveling from port to port before being shipwrecked and taken to prison.

Despite his frustration in trading one place where he was idle for another where he felt the same, Jon had to appreciate how overt his current situation was. At the very least, he could see the bars keeping him inside and saw clear markers of being confined. Here, he had no illusions of what and where he was, unlike at Winterfell where the boundaries were unclear and he felt conflicts everyday on what he should have called home. But it’s not really my home, not from the start.

Jon felt himself pulled out from his stupor when a tune broke through the silence of the cell. He pulled his head from his knees and turned to his left, where he saw Sam blowing away at his recorder as he played a somber tune, one he never heard before. He never saw Sam as the musical type, but after Sam bartered for that recorder at Volantis, playing that thing was the one thing he did to pass the time. Out of the all the things that they took from him, they couldn’t have taken away his blasted pipe?

“Sam, could you please stop playing?” Jon interrupted him.
Sam took his lips from the mouthpiece. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes,” Jon nodded with indignation. “How could you think of playing that thing when we’re in a cage?”

“Not like we have anything to do at the moment, Jon,” Sam shrugged.

“Can you please not play that thing?” Jon asked again.

“Let him be.” Jon turned to his right and saw Benjen also leaning back against the wooden wall, but was much more relaxed than his nephew from how he outstretched his legs and rested his hands behind his head. “We could use some tunes to stop your brooding, Jon.”

“Come on, Uncle Benjen,” Jon protested. He is still my uncle, even after what he and Uncle Aemon told me.

“I’ve been through a lot of silence beyond the Wall, Jon, and I’m not as inclined to brooding as Ned. Silence has its uses, but too much of it leads to inaction and boredom, which can be just as deadly as swords and arrows,” Benjen explained.

“But out of all the tunes Sam could’ve chosen, why does he have to choose a sad one?” Music was the last thing Jon needed at the moment.
“It’s not exactly sad, Jon,” Sam countered. “The man who sold this to me taught me how to play it and it was the first one I learned. He said the tune was like a lamentation of some sort.”

“That’s another word for sadness, Sam,” Jon pointed out.

“Lamentation can point to sadness or reflection, depending on the mood you seek,” Sam explained. “The man told me this tune was created by a man who was a slave trying to understand what freedom is but doesn’t see the difference between the world of freedom and slavery.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. “Someone could do that kind of thinking through music?”

“I don’t know, Jon,” Sam simply replied. “I’m just trying to pass the time and I don’t know much about music.”

Jon sighed, resigned to Sam persisting in his playing. At the same time, how Sam described his tune made him think on what people said about his father. *They say that he could brighten the mood at Flea Bottom with his songs and many maidens swooned over his voice. But were some of his songs also lamentations?*

Jon relaxed as Sam continued playing his recorder. What slightly bothered him was how the other cells began to pay attention. The only clear barriers between the cells were wooden bars, but all of the prisoners could see or even talk to each other. In their case, they were not of this land and thus unable to exchange one word with them. But the prisoners and even some of the guards, their hands on the pommels of their swords, were paying close attention to Sam’s tune and seemed entranced by it.

Jon let out an exhale, resigned to having to hear Sam’s tunes as he couldn’t stop him playing without having the other prisoners and the guards who listened throw a fit. But he took comfort in
how warm the cell felt. There was a brazier outside of the cell, but they were far enough to not allow any of its sparks from igniting the hay that cushioned them from the solid wooden floor. Even though it was still in the summer years, the prison that the three was in the outskirts of a port city and the cold air blowing from the sea was enough to have the three shiver despite the brazier.

Hearing a door open, Jon saw the door to their cell open, with a boy entering with a plate of food for them to eat while escorted by one of the guards. Sam immediately stopped playing as he grabbed at one of the bowls on the plate and stuffed the sticky white grain into his mouth.

“At last, something to eat,” Sam said with his mouth full.

“You don’t know even what that stuff is,” Jon pointed out.

“It doesn’t taste bad compared to the others,” Sam responded. “First bit of food today and I’ll eat anything they give.”

Benjen grabbed at the other bowl. “Eat up, Jon. You’ll need your strength and there is no telling what will happen to us.”

Jon gave up and grabbed the last bowl, stuffing the steamed white grains into his mouth his fingers. Some of them fell onto his overgrown beard, quickly frustrating him with how they just stuck onto it. Would it too much to ask if they gave forks?

While Sam merely pushed the white grains into his mouth, Benjen was more dignified about it as he took a small bit at a time and was careful to not let any of it fall onto his beard, which had also overgrown like Jon’s and Sam’s. They didn’t receive food until their second day in the cells and water until the third day. Well, if one could call it water. The moment the steaming liquid entered his mouth, Jon struggled to not spit it out, as it both burned his tongue and had a strong taste to it.
However, it was the only water that they could get and he just carried on with it.

The one time that Jon, Sam, and Benjen got any decent food was thirty days into their captivity, when the boy entered their cell with a plate of grilled pork slices and boiled chicken pieces, which they all demolished in a matter of moments along with the white grains that came with it and drunk through the spirits that the guards provided. Jon looked out the window of their cell and saw bright explosions in the night sky over the port. He could only surmise that a major celebration was occurring and that must’ve meant that even prisoners could get good food and drink.

But sixty days had passed since that celebration and they were forced to return to simple bowls of sticky white grain and cups of steamed water. Jon noticed that he got thinner as the days passed by, but not in a healthy sense since he felt more sluggish than he was back in the North. The same happened to Benjen, who looked paler than usual and Jon could swear that he could see some of his bones show through his skin.

However, Jon was most worried about Sam, who looked much thinner than he did before they all went on their journey. Even though he had enough energy to play his recorder, he could see that he was much more lethargic and talked much slower than he usually did. He also took a shit more often than he did at the Wall and because they were no latrines in the cell, Jon and Benjen had to endure the smells that came whenever Sam relieved himself in their only bucket. Oh, gods, Sam, Jon silently complained while covering his nose tightly.

Jon also thought on Ghost, who had came with them on their journey to this strange land. However, he was not allowed to be in the same cell as they were and the last he saw of Ghost three moons ago, he saw the guards chain his direwolf to a steel post. I hope he’s okay.

What Jon was most thankful for was that the three of them did not have chains locked on their limbs. The prisoners could move about freely in their wooden cells and the hays were quite comfortable to sleep on. However, it was still a prison and they’ve been stuck in that cell for three moons. Jon looked up to the ceiling and whispered, “Father, mother, if you can hear me, please get us out of this cell. I don’t know if we can keep on eating the same shit.”
“I’m pretty sure she’ll respond, Jon,” Benjen said to Jon. *Right, he’s next to me. Of course he’d listen in.*

“You know, it’s strange, Uncle Benjen,” Jon scratched his head. “I always saw Ned Stark as my father and the one thing I wanted from him besides being a Stark was who my mother was. And yet, I don’t feel at all comforted with the knowledge of where I really come from.”

“And you shouldn’t, Jon,” Benjen replied, which surprised him. “Your secret, well not exactly a secret to us anymore, is something that people would kill for. You may come from two great families, but Ned never revealed what you really were because Robert would have killed you then. And you saw what he became when he came to Winterfell.”

Jon nodded, remembering his disappointment when he looked upon the “Demon of the Trident,” a king who had become such a fat ass that he needed stairs to get off of his damn horse.

“Do you remember what Maester Luwin told you about what Aegon Targaryen said about the Iron Throne?” Benjen continued.

“‘A king should never sit easy,’” Jon answered.

“Exactly, and the same thing applies to where you come from. I think the greatest mistake that any king makes is when he becomes complacent, to the point where he ignores the most obvious threats to his rule. That is what cost your hero, Daeron the Young Dragon, his life when he let his guard down and the Dornish cut him to pieces.”

Jon shifted uneasily at how Benjen described the Young Dragon. Out of all of the great heroes and figures he learned about under Luwin’s tutelage, Daeron was one of the few that stood out. He accomplished what no Targaryen king had ever done before, the subjugation of Dorne, and it was
only the bungling on part of his subordinates that undid everything. *Would that be my fate if I rested easy?*

“And that’s why you told me to keep my identity hidden even here?” Jon looked at Benjen straight in his eyes.

Benjen nodded. “We may be in a strange land, but there is no telling what will happen when word gets out on who you are. Best we keep the important information close to our chest, at least until we come across trustworthy people, if that happens.”

Jon sighed before giving his uncle a smile. He was glad to have him by his side even if they were all in a cell, as he was the closest thing to a hero and a father right now. He was worried about Benjen leaving the Wall, since he knew he had worked hard to rise to become First Ranger and was afraid that leaving would force Ned Stark to kill his own brother out of honor like he did with the deserter. However, Benjen was released from his vows after some convincing on part of Aemon Targaryen to Jeor Mormont and after Jon saved the Lord Commander from that wight.

“I still remain surprised that you agreed to come with me, Uncle Benjen,” Jon said. “I would have expected that you insisted on staying at the Wall, especially since after you returned from that ranging.”

“And I would have, had it not been for Maester Aemon and Lord Mormont. Seeing what Othor had become made me think about Will when he claimed to have seen the White Walkers.” Jon briefly remembered the black brother that Ned Stark personally beheaded with Ice, a bleak memory before they came upon the direwolves. “And Aemon told me something about the importance of family and that you would need someone to guide you as we departed the Wall. But what really did it was when the Lord Commander told me something that I never thought of before.”

“And what would that be?” Jon was genuinely curious.
“He said that for those who take them seriously, vows could be adhered to no matter where one ends up. The Night’s Watch guards the realms of men, but it’s up to other people to challenge the Long Night when it comes. He then talked about how I served the Watch with honor and commended my service as First Ranger and so on. But given what he was made privy to regarding your heritage, he said, ‘The rightful Lord of the Seven Kingdoms needs someone to protect him and you would have fulfilled your oath to the Night’s Watch when you all come back with the help Westeros needs. This is a lesson that I have only learned after seeing how cavalier our esteemed Lannister guest was, which makes me afraid of how the realm will act when the Long Night does come.’ I couldn’t argue with the Lord Commander after that.”

Jon stared at his uncle, having not heard him speak of how the Lord Commander convinced him to go with him and not expecting the Old Bear to be so flexible.

“But that’s not all, is it, Uncle Benjen?” Jon pressed.

Benjen merely stared back at Jon, and that was the first time since their arrival in this strange land that he saw pure fear in his eyes. Jon knew he was being sincere with the incident with the wights and what Lord Mormont said to him, but he decided to drop the subject after remembering his uncle explanations on how he was able to return to Castle Black while the two rangers, Othor included, were found dead.

“I was surprised myself, Jon, when they revealed who your father was to me,” Sam finished his steamed tea while thankfully switching the topic. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think of being in the same cell as a Targaryen—”

“Quiet, Sam!” Benjen scolded the Tarly heir. “We don’t know who might be listening to us talk now.”

“I doubt they can understand us,” Sam reasoned.
“Best not to take that chance, Lord Tarly,” Benjen warned. “Who knows what people will do if they find out that royal blood runs through Jon’s veins?”

“So, it’s best if we continue the illusion that the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms is a northern bastard?” Sam asked.

“For now,” Benjen responded. “We don’t know if any of the people in this land might be connected to King’s Landing. Until we meet people who we can trust, we must not say a word about Jon’s heritage, understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sam nodded.

“Drop that shit, Sam. Just call me Benjen. Any friend of Jon’s is a friend of mine,” Benjen warmly smiled.

“As you wish… Benjen,” Sam complied.

Before they said any more words, the door to their cell opened, but this time with the guards there instead of the boy that brought them food. They were shouting at them in a tongue that none of them understood, but from their hand gestures, Jon could tell that they were ordering them to stand up and follow them. Jon, Sam, and Benjen obeyed their commands and followed the guards out as the door to their cell closed.

Jon noticed that these weren’t the same guards he saw through the wooden bars of the cell before.
While the guards he was familiar with had simple tan robes with swords tucked on their left side, these two wore armor, their heads and faces were shaven, headbands wrapped around their foreheads, and looked far deadlier with the swords that was inserted in their waists. He also noticed that both guards carried two swords each, one shorter than the other. *Who needs two swords?*

They were led outside of the cells to an open area on the outside. Jon had to cover his eyes when they were fully bathed in natural sunlight and as he readjusted, he remembered that the prison was more of a complex, with cells concentrated in one area and other buildings in another area.

Jon’s vision was cleared just in time for him to look upon this magnificent structure, which was more than five levels high and each floor being smaller than the last. It was where the guards were leading them all. *What’s going on here?*

Each of the floors had its own roof, sloped and curved like the rest of the buildings he’d seen so far and made from a soft grey wood. The balconies, pillars and archways were made from a type of red-colored wood and the whole building was topped off with a golden sculpture of what looked like an eagle at the peak of the building. *Are they bird worshippers here?*

They reached the front of the building along with the two men and followed them in. Jon had underestimated the size of the structure and stood shocked by the vast interior, which included clean white screens that seemed to block out the view from the outside and were on each of the walls. He also saw they could be slid open to let fresh air flow through. Low tables and cushions spread around the room, not a chair or stool in sight. *Why does this room feel more open than the rooms I’ve seen before?*

The guards led them into a small room that was screened off and motioned for them to sit on three of the cushions. As they came further into the room, they came across two men sitting on one side of a low table, with teacups in their hands. One of the men was dressed in turquoise robes and wore a large cylindrical hat with wide brims and a bead chain running from it to the man’s lap. He also had brown eyes and a well-maintained beard, which looked as if the man shaved it every few minutes. Jon ascertained that he must’ve been important from how sat and looked at the three of them with certainty.
But what caught Jon’s attention was the other man. Unlike the other, he didn’t have a hat but had a shaven head and a short beard that only covered his jawline, upper lip, and chin. He wore more elaborate robes of blue and white, with the torso adorning strange symbols. He also had a short sword at his side, which looked similar to the short swords carried by the guards. Regarding his eyes, Jon saw steel behind those brown irises, a kind that not even Ned Stark could match behind his grey ones. While he had to give credit to his lord uncle for keeping him a secret for so long despite his seemingly bad ability to lie, here was a man that intimidated Jon almost immediately.

This man was like Ned Stark, whose face betrayed years of experience that came with ruling over one’s own lands and people. However, unlike Ned Stark, Jon instantly felt that this man would not hesitate to string him up and leave his corpse to rot while hanging from a tree branch if he crossed him.

After Jon, Sam, and Benjen sat down in their cushions, the turquoise-robed man poured them tea. However, all were anxious as to why they were in front of these two men.

Then came the biggest surprise since their arrival in this land. “What are your names?” the one with the short sword asked while speaking the common tongue with a heavy brogue.

Joon Kitara had no intention of spending part of his day at a prison, for he had duties to attend to as directed by the emperor. However, remembering that his old comrade was the governor there, he decided that a visit would not be harmful to his obligations and thus diverted his escort to the prison.

As expected, the prison governor, Cheon Huynh, greeted him warmly and with open arms.
“Been too long, my friend,” Huynh said.

“Likewise, Cheon,” Joon replied. “I believe as the owner of this place, you should invite me in for a cup of tea.”


Joon left his main sword and armor in the prison’s armory, but was allowed to take his short sword with him in closed spaces. Following his old friend to the governor’s keep, he was surprised to see a large white wolf chained to a steel pole, the same pole that would be used when caning unruly prisoners.

“What is that creature?” Joon inquired the prison governor.

“I don’t know,” Cheon shook his head. “However, a prisoner said that creature was called a direwolf.”

“A direwolf?” That caught Joon’s attention. He had only heard of direwolves from his readings of Westeros and from what he remembered, there were no sightings of direwolves south of the great ice wall of Westeros in two centuries.

“And that prisoner who said it was a direwolf, is he from Westeros?” Joon continued.

“I believe so. How did you figure that out? And there are three of them here.”
“Three?” Joon was even more surprised. “How long have they been here?”

“Three moons.”

Joon nodded, curiosity growing. “Tell me more about them.”

After settling in the main quarters of the governor’s keep, Joon heard everything from his friend. The three men from Westeros, whose names they did not know due to them not speaking the language, had been found on the shores near the port city of Leng Yi on the island of Leng. Besides the three men, they found remnants of a ship broken apart by a severe storm and they seemed to be the only survivors, them and the large white wolf.

“And because they don’t speak our language, we don’t exactly where they’re from and how they ended up in our lands?” Joon asked, but it was more of a statement.

“Yes.”

“Am I correct to believe that you’ll inform the local commissioner soon?”

“Yes. Any foreigner who ends up on our shores and is not claimed by the end of three moons must be turned over to the nearest imperial official. You know the rules, Joon.”
“Then, you wouldn’t mind if I spoke to these men in person before you do?”

Cheon sighed. “Look, Joon. I can understand your curiosity and I know that you can speak the common tongue better than anyone I know, but foreigners on our shores is a matter only concerning those safeguarding our lands.”

“Does my current title not involve me keeping our lands safe, Cheon?”

“This is not the northern frontier, Joon. You should know that you don’t mess around here and at Yin. If you try to interfere with my duties and those of the commissioner, you’ll end up in serious trouble. I don’t like it, but that’s the way it is?”

“I just want to talk to them, Cheon. Is that too much to ask?”

“In this situation, yes. I would have to report these prisoners to the commissioner, and then I would have to inform him that you spoke to these men. You understand where this is going?”

“Come now, Cheon. We go back a long way. You would truly inform on your friend, the one who saved your life from those Jogos Nhai bastards?”

“If I don’t comply with procedure, I’ll lose my post. I can’t make another mistake like I did in Yin, because if I do, I’ll lose my head.”

Joon sighed, remembering his friend’s incident back in the capital. He was tempted to say that it was his own fault since it was a case of embezzlement regarding military funds, and that his
demotion from an officer in the imperial guard to prison governor in a backwater posting was really a light punishment, given that most cases of embezzlement ended with one’s hands severed and their ears and eyes filled with melted gold.

“If I agree to take responsibility for anything that might happen with these three Westerosi, would you at least let me talk to them?” Joon hoped that this would be enough, as he was getting increasingly frustrated with his old friend’s obstructing a simple request.

“As in, you’ll protect me from any negative repercussions on my end?”

“Yes,” Joon nodded his head.

Cheon smiled. “Fine. I’ll have them brought before us.”

“Now, was that so hard?”

Cheon avoided his question as he stood up and opened his drawers. “Before you meet them, there are some things that you should be aware of. These men came with more than a large white wolf.” He laid out three swords, two of which Joon recognized as Valyrian steel from the black ripples on the blades, a black leather journal, a heavy silver necklace with star sapphires and emeralds, and the most shocking thing, a red-colored dragon egg. Joon picked up the dragon egg, feeling his fingers along its curves and the cold surface. *How do these men have two Valyrian steel swords and a dragon egg?*

Joon also examined the Valyrian steel swords more closely. Both were of a Westerosi design, one a longsword and the other a bastard sword, from what he remembered of how Westerosi termed their weapons. The longsword had dragon cross-guard and single ruby while the bastard sword had a simple curved cross-guard and a white wolf’s head as its pommel. He didn’t know anything about
the bastard sword, but Joon swore to himself that the longsword seemed familiar of him. The only knowledge of Westeros that he had was gleaned from books and scrolls that were translated from the common tongue to the three tongues of this land, but he knew enough to know that until recently, dragonlords ruled the entire continent and one of them carried a longsword that looked exactly like this sword. And that’s when it him. *This is Dark Sister, the long lost sword of Visenya Targaryen! How did they find this?*

Such questions were why he had to speak with the Westerosi, as he had a feeling that these were not ordinary men that just happened to be stranded on their shores.

After two of his men had the three men seated on the cushions in front of Joon and Cheon, the former took a moment to take in the Westerosi in front of him. All had dark hair, overgrown beards, and looked as if they haven’t bathed in moons. One looked stout and looked the most apprehensive, but Joon could tell that his worries were mostly because he was nervous in front of strange men and not from being in a foreign land. It looked as if he was content in a place unlike wherever home was to him. *Interesting...*

Another man, who looked older than the other two, was a type that Joon had seen before: a warrior who had been weathered by the hardships of life and the dangers that existed in the world. He also looked similar to one of the men that sat before them, which Joon interpreted as them being father and son or a close relative.

But the man in the middle looked more striking than the other two. Sharing the raven hair and grey irises of the older man, Joon could see some distress behind his eyes, as if he was confused as to where he belonged in the world. His youth and inexperience might have contributed to the uncertainty that he was sure filled the young man’s mind, but he also something else. Joon had been in court enough times to know when people held a secret that others would kill for, and he could recognize that exact look in that young man’s eyes. *What are you hiding?*

Deciding that he would get better answers by talking with them, Joon spoke to them in the common tongue. “What are your names?”
The eyes of the young man in the middle widened in shock, as did the stout man’s and older man. “You speak the common tongue?” the young man asked.

The man nodded. “Yes. I assumed all of you were from Westeros. Now, what are your names?”

The three exchanged glances with each other, unsure of how to proceed now that they knew at least one of natives in this land spoke their tongue.

“I am Samwell of House Tarly, eldest son of Randyll Tarly, Lord of Horn’s Hill,” the stout man started.

“I am Benjen of House Stark, youngest son of Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North,” the older man introduced himself.

The young man took in a breath and exhaled. “My name is Jon Snow, bastard son of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, and older brother of Benjen Stark.”

Joon translated what they said to Cheon before switching back to the common tongue. “This is the governor of the prison, Cheon Huynh. He told me that they found you all shipwrecked on our shores. Now, normal practice would call for the prison governor to report your presence to the local commissioner and after that, no one knows what will happen to you.”

“So why not do that?” Jon asked. “And I am sorry, but we don’t even know your name.”

Joon chuckled. “Oh, how rude of me. My name is Joon Kitara, Lord of Kushiro and Governor of
the Northwest Province.”

Jon dipped his head in respect, as did Sam and Benjen. “My lord.”

_He knows to respect his elders. Very good_ , Joon mused. “And given from how you three addressed yourselves, I must ask how and why Westerosi highborns have come to our dominions?”

The young man hesitated. “We originally come from the Wall, if you know where that is.” Joon bobbed his head, as he was very familiar with the ancient wall made of ice. “We were attempting to secure transport from Eastwatch to Essos, possibly one of the Free Cities. However, the only transport that was available was captained by someone hailing from the Slaver’s Bay and our aim was to sail there and possibly find work as sellswords.”

_He’s not lying but also not telling the truth_ , Joon thought. However, he allowed Jon Snow to continue talking.

“However, just before we could reach Yunkai, we were set upon by slave raiders and our captain said that they needed to make port at Qarth. A storm hit us and our ship was steered off-course. The next thing we remember, we were washed up on these shores.”

_He’s not lying_ , Joon felt.

“You seem to have an interesting story to tell, Jon Snow, and I am sure the same applies to your friends,” Joon answered. “But why should I believe it?”
Jon immediately got nervous before he calmed down. “My lord, I must ask first where my direwolf is?”

“Ah, the white one? It’s still here,” Joon answered.

“Then, should that not be proof of where we come from?” Benjen asked Joon. “You seem to know much about Westeros, my lord, so I trust you know that direwolves are creatures unique to Westeros.” Joon nodded. “But if you still don’t believe the story Jon told you, then we’ll take our chances with the commissioner.”

Joon sighed. “I wouldn’t be so optimistic of your chances with the commissioner, as after that, I won’t be able to control what will happen to you and your white wolf. I have one more question before I make my decision.” Jon, Benjen, and Sam gave him confused looks as Joon brought out Dark Sister. “Where did you get this blade?”

“Do you know of it, my lord?” Sam asked.

“Any man who is at least acquainted with Westeros’ history would know that this is Dark Sister, the sword held by Queen Visenya Targaryen. No one has seen it since a man they call Bloodraven took it to your wall and hasn’t been seen since. Is that where you got this blade?” Jon nodded. “How exactly did you get it?”

“A man had kept it secret, a man who was old enough to have witnessed a few of the Blackfyre Rebellions, if you know what they were,” Jon answered and Joon silently confirmed that he was aware of them. “He gave it to me for safekeeping because he felt that he was in danger and wanted the sword kept out of the clutches of those who would do him harm.”

*Another word coming from his mouth, that is neither a lie or truth.*
“And was this man a Targaryen?” Joon asked, which prompted more surprised looks from Jon, Benjen, and Sam.

“Yes,” Jon nodded. “His name was Aemon Targaryen, son of Maekar Targaryen.”

Joon knew who that was, and who his father was. A man who gave up the chance to become a king is worthy of any respect in my mind, which is more than what I could say for those at court.

“And what is your relationship with this… Aemon Targaryen?”

Before Jon could answer, Sam spoke up. “We were his stewards, my lord. He entrusted Jon with that sword after helping him with many delicate tasks and I only left Aemon Targaryen’s side because he told me to.”

“I take it you are friends with Jon Snow?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Joon turned to the older man. “And you, Lord Benjen. I assume you’re his uncle?”

Benjen bobbed his head. “Yes, my lord. I came with Jon because I wanted to protect my nephew.”
“An uncle who becomes a father to his nephew honors his family very much,” Joon stated.

Benjen smiled. “Thank you, my lord.”

So, we have two young men who were gifted a Targaryen heirloom because they helped probably the last living member of the dragonlords and an uncle who journeyed all this way just to keep his nephew safe. Joon knew that there was more to their story than they were telling and he was determined to get to the bottom of it, but to do that, he had to make sure Cheon didn’t report them to the commissioner.

“Before I make my final decision,” Joon said as he held up the red dragon egg. “Tell me, how is it possible for three men like yourselves to have something like this in your possession?”

Jon gulped. “Another heirloom, my lord, from Aemon Targaryen.”

How is it that this young man is able to say words that not complete lies and truths at the same time?

Joon wanted to press further into how they have a dragon egg and a Targaryen blade, but he decided to leave it at that. “My men will take you outside. I’ll call you back in once I’ve made a decision on what to do with you all.” Jon, Benjen, and Sam followed the guards that brought them to the governor’s private quarters outside. Once he was sure they were out of earshot, Joon switched back to goryeomal, which was the tongue most spoken in the eastern provinces.
“Cheon, is it possible that you don’t report them?”

“What?” Cheon was more than confused.

“I’ll take them off your hands, Cheon. I’ll bring them to my estate in the northwest and you’ll never have to deal with the commissioner.”

“You do realize what you’re asking, right?”

Joon didn’t want to spend one more second trying to persuade his old friend, so he reached for his pouch and laid out ten paper notes on the table in front of him. “I know you’re having some money problems, so these are the new gold notes that the emperor just issued to the empire. These are not the silver ones that you’re used to, as the only thing you need to do is take them to the local treasurer and he’ll give you gold bullion in the amount that you see here. Unlike the silver notes, you are guaranteed some collateral should the treasurer fail to pay you in full. So, take them.”

Cheon raised an eyebrow. “And in exchange for these notes, you want me to release these men into your custody?”

“I have a feeling that they’re more than what they said of themselves, and I don’t want the commissioner to ruin a great chance I have here of knowing these strangers better. All I ask in return for these notes is that you erase any mention of them from your records and keep the guards quiet about them.”

Cheon pondered Joon’s offer, seemingly torn between his obligations and his financial difficulties. However, he gathered up the notes and held up his teacup. “We have a deal, old friend.” Joon clinked his cup with his, satisfied with the outcome but disgusted that the corruption that became rampant in the mainland had affected his old friend.
While Cheon left the private quarters to count his money and fulfill his end of the bargain, Joon called the three men back in and switched to the common tongue. “I have talked with the governor, and he has agreed to release you all, on one condition.”

“And what is that condition?” Benjen asked with apprehension.

“All of you are to be handed over to me. I will take you to my estate in the northwest and you shall live as my guests. But don’t expect your stay to be free. You will be assigned to tasks throughout my lands as I deem fit and I expect you all to fulfill them to the best of your abilities. In exchange, I will give you food, shelter, and a stipend to be given each moon and to be spent as you wish. Would that be agreeable?”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you,” Jon nodded quickly, as did Sam and Benjen.

“Excellent,” Joon nodded. “I’ll have some servants bring you all a bath and some clean clothes. You need it.”

“My lord, what about Ghost?” Jon inquired, which confused Joon. “That’s the name of my direwolf.”

“I see,” Joon said. “He shall come with us as well, but you’ll have to feed him yourself. After all, he’s your beast and not mine.”

Jon nodded his thanks before servants came and led them out of the private quarters.
“My lord, before we go, may I ask where exactly are we?” Sam asked.

Joon grinned. “Welcome to Yi-Ti, Lord Tarly.”

They had been traveling northwards for over a moon, not including the two days they spent crossing back to the mainland, but their delay was mostly because of Lord Kitara’s duties. Jon correctly assumed that his title as Governor of the Northwest Province must’ve been quite important and that his guardian was a very powerful man in Yi-Ti from the way he spoke to the various city leaders he visited.

And there were so many cities, more than Westeros had. They disembarked at Asabhad, which sat between Qarth and the Yi-Tish capital of Yin. He thought White Harbour was a city, but Asabhad easily put such thoughts to shame, as Jon was struck by how crowded it was, how spread it was, the various buildings of every shape and size, shops and businesses running day and night, and goods and traders from all over the known world. It was a start of a journey into a world that Jon had never seen before, with Asabhad’s brightness, color, and cacophony of voices in its streets almost drowning out his thoughts.

Sam was the most excited about being in Asabhad. Having been spared a potential lifetime full of suffering in the frigidity of the Wall, he went out of his way to look at the many stalls, inns, and what looked like gambling houses they passed by. When Lord Kitara had to meet with the leader of one of Asabhad’s many quarters, Sam took the liberty in sampling each dish served to their table. There were deep-fried fish and dough dishes with meat and vegetable fillings, grilled meats, boiled vegetables, and rich wines and spirits alongside the steaming rice. Even though Sam didn’t know the tongue or tongues, his approval of the food and drink offered to them was enough for Lord Kitara and the other guests smile.
But what Jon, Benjen, and Sam all struggled with was how to actually eat the food offered to them. There were no forks or knives offered to them, with their only utensils being a pair of wooden sticks that Lord Kitara called “hashi.” Jon was tempted to simply do away with propriety and stuff the food in his mouth with his fingers, but Benjen warned him that to do so might embarrass their host. So, Jon was tortured with having to slowly pick up each bit of food from the table with the hashi. *Gods, I miss Gage’s pies already.*

Jon had to fight off the curious when they got too close to Ghost. Some were foolish enough to try to hold him down so that they could skin him for his fur. That was probably the first time Jon felt the dragon emerge, as he snatched Longclaw from Lord Kitara’s horse and easily killed the wolf poacher.

“Jon Snow!” Lord Kitara scolded him. “You do not bare steel without my explicit permission.”

“They were trying to kill Ghost, my lord,” Jon reasoned.

“And you had the right of it, but a foreigner swinging a sword in a public space? Next time, tell me first before you draw your sword. That way, I’ll be explain more easily to the city leader and thus avoid complications. Do you understand?”

Jon saw that Lord Kitara wasn’t scolding him for killing those poachers and only asked that he seek his permission first, which made him greatly appreciate the lord that got them released from prison. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Now, give me the sword,” Lord Kitara held out his hand. Jon returned Longclaw to him. “You’re not ready for Valyrian steel yet. You’re good with a sword, but let a proper swordsman teach you to how to properly fight,” and Lord Kitara cracked a smile at Jon before returning Longclaw to his horse.
After a few days in the port city, Lord Kitara next took them to Tiqui, which Jon learned was a city that sat on the edge of his province and they were now in the lands under his direct rule. It was also a city where many of Yi-Ti’s emperors, specifically those from the purple dynasty, had been born and ruled the country before they were ousted in a manner similar to the Targaryens in Robert’s Rebellion. *It’s still strange that my ancestors were kings who came from old Valyria, even if I had come to terms with the Mad King being my grandfather.*

But such thoughts had to wait for another time, as Lord Kitara was there to collect taxes on behalf of the current emperor. He found out Samwell was good with sums, so he had him help counting the amounts each citizen paid to his tax collectors. Many of the city folk was unsurprisingly bothered at a foreigner counting their coin, but Sam only understood the numbers even with their slight differences and thus Lord Kitara knew that there would no lying or miscalculation from him. After seeing him maximize the numbers recorded in the tax books, Lord Kitara had Sam assist his tax collectors throughout their three-day stay in Tiqui.

Jon passed by the ruins of the past purple emperors, Tiqui now just a market town. He had only heard stories of the Red Keep, having never seen King’s Landing in his life. He did not know if he should be glad that the physical symbols of House Targaryen remained or that those same symbols had been reconverted to Baratheon use. Dragonstone belonged to Stannis Baratheon and he didn’t want to think about what Robert was doing in the Red Keep after seeing him for the first time at Winterfell. *Would this be the fate of my family in a thousand years? Will ruins also be what define House Targaryen many years from now?*

Thankfully, they left soon and traveled due slightly southeast. After over a moon, Jon looked upon the castle that he assumed was Kushiro, Lord Kitara’s keep. It was a much more magnificent structure than the prison governor’s pavilion, as there was one pavilion that was seven levels high and a larger one being fourteen level high. Each floor was smaller than the last, but not by much, and its own roof, sloped and curved like the rest of the buildings he’d seen so far and made from a soft grey wood. The balconies, pillars and archways were made from a dark black wood and walls surrounded the two pavilions. *Now that’s a castle.*

But as they entered the courtyard, Jon noticed how white the walls were and there were many trees with blossomed flowers filling the courtyard. Judging from what he saw of Yi-Tish buildings, he knew that would be plenty of room for them in Kushiro.
Lord Kitara dismounted his horse, as did Jon, Sam, and Benjen. As they handed their horses to stable hands, a woman and three children emerged from the ground level of the large keep and stopped before them before bowing to Lord Kitara. He hugged the eldest, a boy, and kissed the top of the heads of the two youngest, girls. He took a moment with the woman, with them merely exchanging smiles. Jon could hear that they were talking, but couldn’t understand them.

Lord Kitara turned around. “Lord Snow, Lord Stark, and Lord Tarly, may I present my family? This is my wife, Myung,” he pointed to the woman. “My son, Seong,” he gestured to the boy. “And my daughters, Karasa and Komo.” He motioned to the girls. “If I am not here in Kushiro, you can talk to any of them regarding any needs you have. Spend the rest of today getting settled in. Tomorrow, you’ll be put to work. Understood?”

Jon nodded, as did Benjen and Sam.

“Good. I shall retire now. My son Seong will take over now,” and Lord Kitara went into the pavilion with his lady wife walking besides him.

Even though Seong didn’t speak the common tongue, the three of them were able to understand what he was saying from his many hand movements. They walked up to the what Jon felt like was the fifth level of the pavilion and they had to slow down for Sam, who was struggling to go up one flight of stairs. After setting their effects down and Seong left them in the room, each man fell onto the thick sheets laid out on the wooden floor.

“I’m so tired,” Sam managed.

“Rest, boys,” Benjen relaxed on the sheets. “We don’t know what tomorrow will bring, so let’s enjoy the last bit of respite we might have for a while.”
Jon sighed. “What did we just get ourselves into?”

“I don’t know, Jon,” Benjen replied. “However, all I know is that the gods might have played a part in us being here.”

“I think you’re talking too soon, uncle.”

“Maybe, but Lord Kitara has been kind to us so far. What’s more, we wouldn’t have lasted this long without him. Whether he has good intentions for us or not is still to be seen, but it’s possible that the gods willed us to be here.”

“I wish that were true, uncle.”

“At the same time, Jon, don’t get too comfortable here. Remember why Aemon and Jeor allowed us all to leave. No matter what, we have to return to face the Long Night.”

“But we should’ve ended up more west. We should’ve met up with my aunt and worked together to return to Westeros.”

“Maybe the gods want all of us to take some time before that happens. You are young and inexperienced, Jon. You’re not going to be of much help to Daenerys and I get the feeling that it cuts both ways. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have ended up with the Dothraki.”

Jon sighed heavily, sad at how the last true Targaryen was sold off by her brother. When they made port at Volantis, he heard that no one knew where Viserys Targaryen was after threatening
the khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. *I hope he’s dead. I never met him, but no brother should ever sell his sister off to horselord savages*.

“It may be years we spend in Yi-Ti, uncle,” Jon talked despondently.

“But it’ll be years that we should spend well, Jon,” Benjen replied. “Let us use the time here to learn what we can and maybe get the support we need to go back to Westeros and face the threat north of the Wall. And remember, we must come back.”

Jon nodded, purpose filling him once again. “Thank you, uncle.”

“I’m here for you, and so is Sam and Ghost. But remember, we must return,” and Benjen slipped into a deep slumber.

As Jon closed his eyes, he was taken back to the Wall, to the time when the world he knew came tumbling down.

*Jon was leaning on the railings that overlooked the training yard of Castle Black. While he was glad that Sam was going to assist Maester Aemon in the library and rookery and thus putting his true talents to good use, he was frustrated at not being assigned to the rangers, despite being the best swordsman and rider among the new recruits. He was relieved that Uncle Benjen had returned from his ranging despite losing two men, but was saddened when he reminded him that the worth of every man on the Wall is based on what they did and therefore, he could not help him.*

“Steward Jon,” Jon scoffed. *He remembered the look in Ser Alliser’s eyes and how he took pleasure in Jon being denied his choice of post. He still remembered when his argument with Dareon, who essentially told him that Jon had a choice in going to the Wall while he himself didn’t due to a false accusation. He was tempted to complain to the Lord Commander, but after seeing*
Jeor mete out humiliating tasks whenever recruits or black brothers complained, he decided that it was better to keep his mouth shut. However, he did contemplate leaving.

"There is no shame in being a steward," Sam said.

"Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life washing an old man's smallclothes?"

"The old man is Lord Commander of the Night's Watch," Sam reminded him. "You'll be with him day and night. Yes, you'll pour his wine and see that his bed linen is fresh, but you'll also take his letters, attend him at meetings, squire for him in battle. You'll be as close to him as his shadow. You'll know everything, be a part of everything . . . and the Lord Steward said Mormont asked for you himself!" Then Sam talked about how his father made him stand beside him during all meetings before he was replaced by his younger brother Dickon, meaning that he was effectively eliminated from his father's counsel.

Jon was taken aback. It was true, Ned Stark had often made Robb part of his councils back at Winterfell and that made him think. "I never asked for this," he said stubbornly.

"None of us are here for asking," Sam reminded Jon. And that's when he fully saw Sam in a different light. Craven or not, the deposed heir of Horn's Hill had found the courage to accept his fate like a man. On the Wall, a man gets only what he earns, Benjen Stark had said the last night before he went on his ranging. He heard it said that bastards grow up faster than other children. On the Wall, a man grew up or perished.

Jon let out a deep sigh. "You have the right of it. I was acting the boy."

"Then you'll stay and say your words with me?"

"The old gods will be expecting us." He made himself smile.
They set out late that afternoon. The Wall had no gates as such, neither here at Castle Black or anywhere along its three hundred miles. They led their horses down a narrow tunnel cut through the ice, cold dark walls pressing in around them as the passage twisted and turned. Three times their way was blocked by iron bars, and they had to stop while Bowen Marsh drew out his keys and unlocked the massive chains that secured them. Jon could sense the vast weight pressing down on him as he waited behind the Lord Steward. The air was colder than a tomb, and more still. He felt a strange relief when they reemerged into the afternoon light on the north side of the Wall.

Sam blinked at the sudden glare and looked around apprehensively. "The wildlings . . . they wouldn't . . . they'd never dare come this close to the Wall. Would they?"

"They never have." Jon climbed into his saddle. When Bowen Marsh and their ranger escort had mounted, Jon put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Ghost came loping out of the tunnel.

The Lord Steward backed away from the direwolf. "Do you mean to take that beast?"

"Yes, my lord," Jon said. Ghost's head lifted. He seemed to taste the air. In the blink of an eye he was off, racing across the broad, weed-choked field to vanish in the trees.

Once they had entered the forest, they were in a different world. Jon had often hunted with his father and Jory and his brother Robb. He knew the wolfswood around Winterfell as well as any man. The haunted forest was much the same, and yet the feel of it was very different.

The sun was sinking below the trees when they reached their destination, a small clearing in the deep of the wood where nine weirwoods grew in a rough circle. Jon drew in a breath, and he saw Sam staring with his eyes widened. Even in the wolfswood, one never found more than two or three of the white trees growing together; a grove of nine was unheard of. The forest floor was carpeted with fallen leaves, blood red on top, black rot beneath. The wide smooth trunks were bone pale, and nine faces stared inward. The dried sap that crusted in the eyes was red and hard as ruby. Bowen Marsh commanded them to leave their horses outside the circle. "This is a sacred place, we will not defile it."
When they entered the grove, Sam turned slowly looking at each face in turn. No two were quite alike. "They're watching us," he whispered. "The old gods."

"Yes." Jon knelt, and Sam knelt beside him.

But before Jon could say his vows, he saw Benjen dismount his horse walk up to him. “First Ranger,” Bowen Marsh addressed him.

“Lord Steward. I apologize for interrupting the ceremony, but Maester Aemon told me to fetch Jon. He also asked me to bring Sam along.”

“But First Ranger, we’re about to induct two new brothers into the Watch. Can it not wait?”

“I’m sorry, Lord Steward, but it can’t. Maester Aemon said it’s urgent.”

Bowen Marsh sighed before nodding in resignation. “All right. Jon, Sam, if you want to take your vows at another time, let me know by the end of the week.”

“Yes, Lord Steward,” Jon and Sam replied before following Benjen back through the Wall to Castle Black.

Benjen led them to the library, where Maester Aemon was waiting in his chair as he went through different pieces of parchment.
“Close the door, Sam,” Aemon told him, which Sam did. “Sit down, both of you.” Again, they complied.

“Maester Aemon, I must know why you had us come here when we were about to take our vows,” Jon said. “I wish to start my duties to the Watch as soon as possible.”

“Ah, you have taken my words to heart, young Jon?”

“Yes,” Jon nodded. “And I wish to commence my time here at the Wall.”

“Tell me, did you ever wonder why the men of the Night’s Watch take no wives and father no children?”

Jon was confused as to why Maester Aemon asked that. “No.”

“So they will not love. Love is the death of duty and the annals of history all point to the great tragedies when one casts his duty aside. We’ve seen with it with Duncan Targaryen, we almost saw it when Jaehaerys defied his mother to marry Alysanne, and we’ve seen it with Rhaegar Targaryen,” Maester Aemon said.

“Hold on,” Jon did not know what prompted him to say that, but he felt that he had to stop this. “What do you mean by that last one? Rhaegar kidnapped and raped my aunt Lyanna...”

“But what most people don’t realize is that there is a strength that comes from love, a kind that no amount of time or amount of steel can ever hope to break. Duty can only take someone so far before it finally fails him, but with love, a person can hope to go on despite the insurmountable obstacles. Jaehaerys married Alysanne and he helped usher in a new era for Westeros. Aegon loved his sisters and with them at his side, he conquered Westeros. And had circumstances been different for my great nephew, Rhaegar could have brought this continent back from the brink with the women beside him.”

“What are you talking about? Why are we hearing this?” Jon was getting very distressed.

“Jon, what Maester Aemon is trying to say is that... we know who your mother is,” Benjen jumped in.

Jon looked at his uncle, water forming in his eyes. Sam was also shocked, as he Jon didn’t know who his mother was, until now.

“Who?” Jon asked as he gulped.

“Jon, before we say that, just know that Ned and I kept this a secret from you because we wanted to keep you safe and it was what she made Ned promise to do,” Benjen said.

Jon was close to exploding from impatience. “Who. Is my mother?” he pressed.
“Your mother is your aunt Lyanna,” Jon turned back to Maester Aemon as he finally revealed what he knew. “And your father was Rhaegar Targaryen. That means you’re my nephew.”

Jon heard a pin drop, as the frustration leaked out of him and he felt himself sinking through the floor.

“No… it can’t be true…” Jon managed to say. But looking upon Benjen and Aemon, he didn’t see that they were lying. “Please…”
I hope that was a good start and a good ending in this chapter. A good way to imagine Joon Kirata is the actor Ken Watanabe, who I based the character from thanks to the Last Samurai. And Benjen and Sam have accompanied Jon on this great journey in the east. Already, Sam is having a good time and will not be the repressed nerd in the show. Also, I hope my reasoning for Benjen leaving the wall and going with Jon makes sense.

For eight fucking seasons, we see Jon deal with angst and uncertainty as a bastard, with his Targaryen heritage doing absolutely nothing! In this story, Jon already knows
who he is and this will largely be about Jon maturing into a better person while aware of where he came from. The flashbacks will explain further on the situation on the Wall before Jon departs and Benjen came back from that fateful ranging. He will be very important for the story from here on out.

Besides Dark Sister and Longclaw, the journal and necklace will also be important for the story (I'll explain how Jon could get Longclaw if he's not sworn to the Watch). A lot of the influences for Yi-Ti is drawn from Ming China, Joseon Korea, and Japan during the Sengoku period. Jon will not be idle in Yi-Ti for long.

Most of the story will take place in Yi-Ti, but there will be attention given to the rest of the known world.

Plz comment and lmk what you all think. Have a great day!
First Day

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but my attention is now officially split between this and my other story FROM THE ASHES BEGIN ANEW. Will appreciate everyone's patience as I try to publish quality content as best as I could.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It is the truth, Lord Commander," Benjen stated to Jeor.

“So, you’re telling me that all this time, Ned Stark has been hiding the true Targaryen heir, one who has more claim to the throne than Viserys Targaryen, as his bastard son? Had this been anyone else, I would’ve demoted you and made you clean the boots of every brother in the Watch,” Jeor replied indignantly.

“I don’t know if I do have a claim to the throne anymore,” Jon pointed out. “Doesn’t Westeros respect those who took their claim by conquest?”

Benjen scoffed. “And look how good old and fat Robert Baratheon used his time on the Iron Throne. Makes me wonder on how all of us could’ve avoided the Rebellion if we all knew the truth in time.”

“That wouldn’t have made much of a difference,” Aemon replied. “Events were long in the making for the realm to ignite in war, and Rhaegar supposedly kidnapping Lyanna Stark was only a convenient excuse for those seeking the throne to make their move.”

Jon was still reeling from the truth. Rhaegar marrying Lyanna and Elia Martell serving as a witness, with the marriage documents stamped with her own personal seal while maintaining her own marriage to the Crown Prince. Lyanna giving Ned a copy of the letter that explained
everything to people such as his grandfather and a copy of the scathing one sent to Robert Baratheon, as well as another copy written in the hand of Elia Martell herself which she sent to her brother Doran Martell. Most importantly, the reveal of his real name, Daeron. After recovering from the shock, he had to chuckle from how his liking of the Young Dragon was not a coincidence after all.

“Regardless of the Rebellion and everything that came after, Jon’s true heritage changes many things. At the very least, he cannot stay here at the Wall and I don’t what compelled Ned Stark to let him come here,” Jeor stated.

“We can’t blame my brother for thinking the Wall is the safest place in the realm, as he doesn’t know what is stirring in the lands north of here,” Benjen replied.

“Aye,” Jeor nodded, who was still a little unsettled by the encounter with Othor the previous night, which Jon saved him from and prompting him to give him Longclaw. “I was skeptical of the reports, but after last night, I know that nothing should be left to chance. You barely came back from your previous ranging, Benjen, and I am not going to ask exactly what you saw. I believe that given the changed circumstances, I should contact Mance Rayder.”

Jon, Sam, and Benjen looked at him with astonishment. “You would contact the King Beyond The Wall, a deserter no less?” Benjen exclaimed.

“Nothing serious yet, Benjen,” Jeor explained. “But given his movements and what happened with Othor, it cannot be a coincidence. I have to find out what he knows of the threat that’s coming before I can make the next move. And I believe that should solely be my concern.”

“What do you mean?” Benjen asked.
“As I said, Jon cannot stay here. But he can’t depart alone. You’ll need to go with him,” Jeor said.

More surprise came from Jon and Sam, but none more so than the First Ranger. “You would have me desert the Wall, my vows, and my post?” Benjen’s eyes widened.

“Be committed to vows long enough, you can stay true to them from anywhere,” Jeor answered. “That’s a lesson that I wish I had learned long ago, and one that I find very appropriate given the lack of seriousness from our previous Imp visitor.”

“You don’t think Westeros will come to aid the Wall when the wights and then the Long Night approaches?” Jon asked.

“I have more confidence in the North responding,” Jeor replied. “But the North is just one kingdom and the Long Night will affect everyone in the world. When they come, a united front must be made if we are to stave off ultimate death from plunging us into the dark abyss. And that is the reason why you must leave.”

“So that I can come back with help?” Jon realized.

Jeor nodded. “Westeros is not the whole world, and I think the whole world will need to fight the Long Night when it comes. I’ll give you a pass that you will take to Eastwatch and enough coin to get you a boat to Essos. If you can, meet up with your Targaryen brethren and find a way back to Westeros together, but don’t go back yet. Get as much help as you can and return to retake the Iron Throne. Then, we can face the Long Night together.”

“And where do I fit in all of this?” Benjen inquired.
“You’re his uncle, and you’re the closest thing to a father that Jon has right now. He’s going to need you to guide him and protect him as he goes east.”

“But what about my vows?” Benjen asked.

Jeor straightened himself up. “As I know you to take your oaths seriously, I command you to make another oath.”

“Of course, my lord,” Benjen nodded.

“Protect Daeron Targaryen, the Third of His Name,” Jeor pointed to Jon. “He must come back after seeing a glimpse of the threat, and he must come back with help, the help that Westeros cannot provide by itself. Guide him towards manhood and greatness, be present in everything he does, and you would have fulfilled your duty to the realms of men. Do you accept this charge?”

Benjen cleared his throat before nodding. “I do.”

Jeor pulled out a piece of parchment from his desk and a quill. “Then, as Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, I hereby release you from your vows and permit you to leave the Wall. Write down your resignation from you post as First Ranger, sign your name, and it’ll be done.” Benjen promptly did so.

“But before you leave, may I have some private words with my nephew?” Aemon requested.
Jeor nodded and gestured for Benjen and Sam to leave the room.

“I’m afraid that I won’t be able to see you for years, Daeron,” Aemon stated. “And I shall pray to the old gods and the new for them to keep my alive long enough to see you again.”

Jon struggled to keep it together, not liking the thought of leaving the man who had become the grandfather he never knew he needed.

“As you leave this place, allow me to give you some advice as you embark on your journey.”

“Of course… uncle,” Jon said, prompting a grin from Aemon.

“Our family has been said to have committed greatness and great evil throughout its history. I, for one, do not take much stock in how the histories have been written despite my time at the Citadel, but I will not deny that our family committed a great deal of mistakes while they ruled Westeros. And from my years on this earth, I’ve had plenty of time to reflect on those mistakes.”

Jon waited patiently, eager to hear what the oldest dragon living had to say about his family.

“Take for example, Aegon the Unworthy. He lusted after many, but he didn’t understand the concept of love, something he could have embraced had his mother Larra Rogare not abandon him and his family. Love is a force that makes us cling onto the things when it could cost us everything, even our lives, and that was a lesson that I wish I had learned decades before. Love allowed Jaehaerys to accomplish great things while the lack of it caused the Unworthy to take the realm down a destructive path. So, Daeron, as you journey, look for someone that you can love, as that will give you a strength when all else fails.”
“Jon nodded strongly. “I shall remember that, uncle.”

“Another lesson I have learned. You know Bloodraven, correct?”

“Of course.”

“Then, you know of his courting of Shiera Seastar.” Jon nodded, but his silence confirmed it for Aemon. “Besides her beauty, Shiera Seastar possessed every trait that was desirable for men. Intelligence, gracefulness, and gregariousness among other things. But Bittersteel and Bloodraven fought over her and the realm bled. Too many mishaps occurred because men were fooled by the wiles of beautiful women, women who would have never appreciated them in the first place. So, don’t ever let yourself be used or manipulated by anyone, Daeron. And be on guard when good things come your way, as sometimes, things are too good to be true.”

Jon admittedly didn’t quite understand the deeper consequences of that lesson as he never experienced them yet, but he would remember it. “I will.”

“And I must ask, are you comfortable with Daeron or Jon?”

“Both are fine, uncle.”

“As you wish. Lastly comes the final lesson that I wish to impart with you.”
Jon nodded, with his silence again confirming that he was listening.

“Never lose sight of who you are and what you are.” Aemon knew that Jon was confused, so he elaborated. “I am sure you are aware of Baelor Targaryen.” Jon snorting at his name prompted Aemon to continue. “He saw himself as a septon and a holy man, so sure that he was the gods’ representative in this world. Some saw him as exactly that, while some others knew better. He forgot that he carried the blood of the dragon in his veins and allowed his devotion to the Faith to cloud his mind and better judgment. How else do you explain how the ones who lost so much in Daeron’s war in Dorne were so angry with how Baelor dealt with them?”

Jon had heard very conflicting things about Baelor. Catelyn spoke of him very highly due to his acts on behalf of the Faith and his accomplishments peaking with the Sept of Baelor, while Ned Stark echoed their ancestor Cregan Stark’s disdain for him. Aemon’s explanation of Baelor the Not So Blessed certainly made sense for Jon, who never really had much thought for the Faith anyway.

But quickly, Jon caught on Aemon’s meaning. He was no longer a bastard. He was Daeron of House Targaryen, the Third of His Name, and the ruler to the Seven Kingdoms. He was also descended from Theon Stark and Brandon the Builder, two rulers who accomplished extraordinary feats that the world remembered them for and also carrying the blood of the Warg and Marsh Kings. He had two great bloodlines in his body, but he would have to fight hard to get his family’s throne back after the misdeeds of his… grandfather.

“I am the blood of the wolf and the blood of the dragon,” Jon declared. “I shall remember who I am and what I am. No one shall tell me different and I will not make the same mistakes as the ones before me.”

Aemon sighed, but out of pride for his nephew’s newfound confidence. “That reminds me, Jon. I have certain things that I must give you before you leave.”

Jon was intrigued as Aemon pulled out a journal, its black leather covers still holding thanks to
being rebound several times. “This journal was written by a previous Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch and we’ve already talked about him.”

“Bloodraven?” Jon asked in awe as he held the journal in his hands.

“He was a wise man ahead of his years, more so than myself, and he had many lessons to pass on to our family. I have also included my own thoughts on our family’s history, so I’ll be present wherever you are, Jon.”

“Thank you,” Jon managed.

“Jon, if you can, I need you to do something for me,” Aemon said to him as he began to get to his feet. He was quick to help him as his uncle guided him towards the corner of the room where the hearth was.

“Grab that poker, could you please?” his uncle asked. Jon frowned but complied, poking at the charred logs that were left within the fireplace.

“You’ll have to clear away the logs before you can use that,” Aemon explained.

Jon swept the logs out of the fireplace, his sleeve instantly consumed in soot as he did so. Soon enough, the last of the logs were moved out of the hearth and he knew that something was off when one of the stone slabs underneath wobbled under his palm as he leaned on it.

“I think you know what to do next.”
Jon pried the stone slabs up and out of the hearth. Getting to the bottom of the false floor, Jon saw a chest made of ironwood with steel linings and a sword in its sheath, its dragon cross-guard obvious. He grabbed them both and set them upon the floor.

“What is this?” Jon asked as he helped Aemon back into his seat and retook his own, noticing the way his uncle rummaged underneath the small table next to him and pulling out a small key.

“Things I don’t want to become lost when I depart,” Aemon cryptically replied as he fiddled with the lock before latching the chest open.

“Could you help me with the contents, Jon?” Aemon asked and he shot to his feet to help him. Jon would be lying if he said his curiosity wasn’t what had him stand to his feet that quickly.

Jon brushed away the excess mixture of soot and dust from the first thing that he saw in the chest, a small black pouch containing something heavy inside. But what caught Jon’s attention was the red dragon egg that was besides the black pouch.

“Do you see the dragon egg and the pouch?” Aemon asked.

“Yep.” Jon replied. “How do you have a dragon egg?”

“A keepsake from a childhood long lost, when I played with Egg over our imaginary dragons. You know him as Aegon the Fifth of His Name.” Jon sighed, sad that a king like Aegon V, despite his flaws, had to meet a fiery end at Summerhall. “I want you to have it, as a reminder of where you come from. If the gods will it, you might have more success than Egg did.”
Jon wasn’t sure if he could hatch dragons in the first place, as he didn’t know how to.

“Open the pouch, please,” Aemon urged Jon.

“What’s in this?” Jon asked as he untied the pouch.

“A peace of jewelry that belonged to somebody that caused Bloodraven much joy, much happiness, and much pain,” Aemon explained as Jon pulled out the silver necklace from inside. Jon took a moment to admire such a beautiful piece of art, as age like with most pieces of jewelry had done nothing to take away its elegance. Numerous star sapphires and emeralds alternated in the polished silver chain of the necklace.

“Is this what I think it is?” Jon asked as he realized to whom this necklace belonged.

“If you know your history, Jon, you would know that the piece of jewelry in your hands belonged to Bloodraven’s lover, Shiera Seastar,” Aemon stated as Jon looked down at the necklace, almost mesmerized by its gemstones. “He took it with him to the Wall as reminder of the love he couldn’t have.”

As Jon put the necklace back in the pouch, he turned his attention to the sword and unsheathed it. He noticed that it was made of Valyrian steel, just like Longclaw, and with its dragon cross-guard and ruby at its center, it didn’t take long for Jon to recognize what this sword and who it belonged to.

“This is Dark Sister?” Jon stared at the sword in awe.
“Correct, another keepsake that Bloodraven took with him. He kept it here for safekeeping even after Egg told him to leave it at King’s Landing. As the heir to our house, it is yours.”

Jon sheathed Dark Sister, set it down upon the table, and brought his uncle into a strong hug. “Thank you so much, Uncle Aemon. I will never forget and I shall return.”

Aemon returned the hug gratefully as Jon felt tears fall on his shoulder. “I know, nephew. I know.”

As Jon and Benjen were about to set out from Castle Black and take the ship to Essos from Eastwatch, Sam approached them. “Sam, what are you doing here?” Jon asked.

“I want to come with you both, if you have room for one more,” Sam answered.

“Why do you want to come with us, Lord Tarly?” Benjen inquired.

“I haven’t taken my vows and there’s nothing left for me in Westeros now,” Sam explained. “I can’t go back to Horn Hill and Jon, you were the only to have treated me with any decency, something that not even my family did. If there is one thing that I have learned so far, it is to not let a friendship wither on the vine.”

Jon’s first instinct was to think that Sam wanted to go with him because of his Targaryen heritage, but he pushed those thoughts aside as he realized how ridiculous they were. Sam just wanted a friend and Jon was exactly that to him, so he couldn’t blame him for trying to keep a friendship going.
“Get a horse, Sam. We’ll be waiting,” Jon answered. Sam smiled before he ran back to the stables, loaded his effects on his mare, and the three galloped to Eastwatch, towards an unknown horizon.

Jon woke to the rays of sunlight penetrating through the white paper screens of the walls of his room, or rather their room. Rubbing his eyes, Jon sat himself up and saw Sam and Benjen still sleeping. It had been only yesterday since they arrived at Kushiro, but something about his castle felt warmer to him than he ever did at Winterfell.

Suddenly, the screen doors to their room opened. Joon Kitara’s son, Seong, said something to Jon that he didn’t understand, but from his hand gestures, he was telling the three of them to follow him.

Jon crawled to Sam and was momentarily surprised at the feeling of hard wooden floor. “Wake up, Sam. It’s morning.” When he merely groaned, Jon shook him. “Come on, Sam. It’s almost time to break our fast.”

“Fine, fine, give me a moment,” Sam managed while rubbing his eyes. Jon turned around to see Benjen already sitting up.

The three followed Seong Kitara down to the ground level of Kushiro, where they found Joon, his wife Myung, and his two daughters Komo and Karasa already seated on mats around a low table. Jon noticed that Lord Kitara’s daughters were eyeing him especially nervously, as this was the first time that they saw another comely young man enter their home. *Best be careful around those two*, Jon sighed internally.
“How good of you join us, my lords,” Joon greeted with his heavily accented common tongue. “We were about to break our fast without you.”

“Apologies, my lord,” Benjen replied as the three and Seong took their seats on the mats.

Jon looked at the table and saw that each had a bowl of rice, another bowl containing a brown broth, and a small plate of red-coated vegetables that smelled fermented. He also saw that their only utensils were those hashi and a strange-looking spoon. Finally, something I’m familiar with.

“Our breakfast is rice, misoshiru, and baechi, which are those vegetables that you see on your plates. Enough to sustain us until the noon meal,” Joon explained.

Jon was skeptical at how such meager foods would keep them going until that time, and so did Sam and Benjen. However, this was their first meal in their host’s castle and they didn’t want to repay his generosity with insults, so they simply nodded.

Joon clapped his hands together, as did Myung, Seong, Komo, and Karasa. Jon, Benjen, and Sam followed their gestures. “Xièxiè nín zuò de fàn (thank you for the meal),” Joon said in guanhua, the official tongue of Yi-Ti, before picking up his hashi and eating from his rice bowl. The family repeated his words before they followed suit, with Jon, Benjen, and Sam mumbling.

Jon still didn’t know how to handle the hashi so he instead picked up the strange looking spoon and drank the brownish miso broth. Although the soup didn’t look tasty to him, the miso gave off a very pleasant smell and its warmth inside Jon’s throat instantly relaxed him, which he needed after ending up in this strange land. Setting down the spoon, he kept his eyes closed as he continued to relish the soothing feeling from the miso.

“Enjoying yourself, Lord Snow?” Jon heard Joon speak to him. He opened his eyes to see Seong,
Komo, and Karasa look at him with bewilderment.

“This is great soup, my lord,” Jon replied.

“Glad that at least one dish in his land has become agreeable to you,” Joon grinned. “I shall have Seong teach you to how to use the hashi. After all, a citizen of the empire cannot hope to advance by eating like barbarians.”

Jon pursed his lips. “Am we citizens, my lord?”

“No,” Joon replied bluntly. “But if you wish to survive here, you have to show proper respect to the customs of this land. As men possessing at least a basic education, all of you should understand that.”

Jon sighed before he picked up his hashi.

“I didn’t hear your response, Lord Snow,” Joon interrupted. “In these lands, when an elder speaks to the younger, the younger should always respond. To not answer is considered very rude.”

*So many rules to follow*, Jon thought. “I do understand, my lord.”

“Good,” Joon stared at Jon. “Now, after we break our fast, I will assign you to your duties around the castle. But before that, I will take you all to my headquarters.”
“Your headquarters?” Benjen asked.

“As Governor of the Northwest Province, I am charged with the defense of the empire from ravaging bands of barbarians in the northern steppes. But mind you, I am not a warden in the Westerosi manner. I serve at the pleasure of the emperor and I can only fulfill the military duties of my post after having served in the army myself.”

Jon and Benjen had to appreciate the irony of their new surroundings. The Night’s Watch mostly fought against wildlings, and now they were in the household of an official who also had to defend the realm against so-called savages. “So besides being a lord, you’re a soldier?” Benjen inquired.

“I was,” Joon confirmed. “Ten years in the cavalry and I commanded a brigade against the barbarians in the steppes. Then again, every lord in Yi-Ti is expected to perform military duty at some point in his life and I was no exception. Being governor means that I am also Captain-General of the Northwest Imperial Army.”

Jon absorbed Joon’s words, as did Benjen. Sam listened, but continued eating the rice, miso, and baechi. **So, Lord Kitara is not just some random lord. He’d seen battle and holds a significant rank in Yi-Ti. Is it possible that our meeting him was not a coincidence?**

“So, Yi-Ti has a well-defined structure for its military forces,” Benjen observed.

“Yes,” Joon nodded. “While there are no banners to call in Yi-Ti and all men carrying arms must foremost swear loyalty to the emperor while committing many years of uninterrupted service, the lords in Yi-Ti still hold considerable influence in that they can mobilize the manpower needed by the empire in crises and the emperor can trust the lords to continue collecting taxes from the land. Failure to do that would result in severe consequences for families such as mine.”
Jon listened with astonishment at how similar and different Yi-Ti was to Westeros. The lords still held power, but not as much as in Westeros since they all had to swear loyalty to this emperor, whom he assumed was the supreme leader of the realm. Authority was more centralized than in Westeros, which Jon assumed was very useful in keeping ambitious lords in line and not able to raise his own armies.

“Lord Stark,” Joon addressed to Jon’s uncle. “I understand that you have some experience commanding men, correct?”

“Yes, my lord,” Benjen replied.

“Would you please elaborate?”

Benjen hesitated at revealing the truth before exhaling and readying himself. “I was the First Ranger of the Night’s Watch and led many rangings north of the Wall. So, I have had many years to hone my experiences at command.”

“So, you’re a deserter of the Watch?” Joon concluded.

“No, my lord,” Benjen corrected him. “Before I left, I was released from my vows to the Watch and granted leave by the Lord Commander. Therefore, I am no deserter.”

Joon became very confused. “From what I remember, vows to the Night’s Watch are for life. Why did the Lord Commander release you, his right hand man in ranging, from the Wall?”
Benjen took a moment, as he needed to be careful on how he worded the next sentences. “I was needed… to escort my nephew. The Lord Commander knew that Jon needed guiding as he journeyed west, so he was very willing to allow me to accompany him and his friend, Samwell Tarly.”

“That doesn’t answer the question on why the Lord Commander released you in the first place.”

Jon and Benjen exchanged glances, knowing that they couldn’t reveal the whole truth.

“The Lord Commander… found things north of the Wall that concerned him,” Benjen managed. “But the solution that he was looking for could not be found on Westeros, and he knew that to find the solution would potentially take years, years that Jon would have to spend. That was why the Lord Commander released me from my vows, as to find that solution required wisdom and support, both of which that I could provide.”

Jon looked at Joon with slight nervousness, afraid that the Lord of Kushiro would realize that Benjen had only told a partial truth. Fortunately for him and Benjen, Joon dropped the matter by resuming the breaking of his fast.

_He knows that we’re not telling him everything. He must know_, Jon thought fearfully. While Joon proved very generous in inviting them into his home and allowing them to eat at his table, Jon had to keep his Targaryen heritage a secret. At least until Joon proved trustworthy, which required more time.

But on the other hand, a man like Joon Kitara would not have been able to survive in the cavalry and rise to become a powerful man in the empire without possessing some cunning, and Jon could sense that the Lord of Kushiro had more than his fair share of it.
“You’ve made a very good impression at Asabhad, Lord Tarly. The city leaders were very pleased with your conduct despite your obvious stumbling with the hashi,” Joon spoke to Sam.

Sam became bashful with the praise Joon heaped onto him. “Thank you, my lord,” he replied.

“But be careful,” Joon warned him. “The right amount of attention can get you enough clout with the right people. Too much of it, and you’ll be painting a target on your back. Understood?”

Sam’s smile disappeared, not expecting their host to appraise his behavior. “Yes, my lord,” he managed as he put a small amount of rice in his mouth by putting the hashi together and sticking them both in the bowl. Jon copied his friend’s method, which he then used to stab the vegetables finally put them in his mouth. The strong aroma released in his mouth caused Jon to cough, prompting laughter from Seong, his sisters, and their mother.

Joon smiled. “It’s hard to handle the first time, Lord Snow. But it’ll be filling until noon and will help rid the poisons in the body in a gradual manner.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Jon replied.

“There are many ways to thank you in the empire,” Joon stated. “The one I’ll teach you now is ‘xiè xie’, which is thank you in guanhua, the official tongue. Try saying it.”

Jon cleared his throat. “Shyeh shyeh,” he attempted while retaining his northern brogue. Seong snorted while Karasa and Komo giggled, but all stopped under the scolding gaze of their father.
“We’ll work on your pronunciation later, Lord Snow. Let us just finish our meal and we shall depart to my headquarters,” Joon said.

After Myung took their empty dishes, the three followed Joon to the stables and mounted their steeds. Jon felt uncomfortable in the Yi-Tish garbs that he, Sam, and Benjen had to wear. While Benjen wore a black silk robe with grey trousers underneath a white overcoat and Sam wore a loose fitting tan overcoat over a green silk robe with blue trousers, Jon wore a grey silk robe with black trousers underneath a red overcoat with black linings. The colors of House Stark and Targaryen. How convenient…

Jon noticed that Joon’s daughters were staring at him from the courtyard and were fidgeting nervously. He had seen their looks before, from how Jeyne Poole and some of the servant girls at Winterfell stared at him for his handsome features. He decided to take it more in stride, as he was not in the North and there was no Lady Catelyn scolding him for his bastardy stain, which was a falsity to begin with.

Don’t get distracted, Jon reminded himself. Soon, the four rode out of Kushiro along with twenty of Joon’s men as escorts as they rode eastwards.

Jon heard tell of the dragon roads laid down by Valyrians of the past, and the roads that they strode upon in Yi-Ti were nothing compared to the kingsroad sections in the North. They were well paved, well maintained, and there were guard postings every few miles. While only three men manned each post, it was enough to deter any organized banditry and impose a certain sense of security among any travelers. Jon’s opinion of Yi-Ti had already become high from his time at Asabhad, but seeing the roads only increased his opinion of the realm.

The group rode for an hour until they came across a very large castle, with higher walls and a wider compound. Once they neared the gates, the guards promptly opened them after recognizing Joon and the three became more awed at what lay inside.
There were groups of soldiers training in various parts of the large courtyard, which dwarfed Kushiro’s and Winterfell’s. There was a group training with spears, another with swords, and one other practicing what Jon assumed were fighting techniques unique to Yi-Ti. There were also groups of soldiers standing watch on the walls and others coming in and out of the various pavilions, which also had sloped roofs and screen doors.

But what struck Jon was how well organized the whole castle was. Not only was there no space wasted, each man was focused on the task at hand, whether it was training or other duties of the castle, and none sat or stood idly. These were men that were focused in being the best soldiers that they could be and each played a part in keeping the castle, and possibly the army, in top condition. *Even Winterfell doesn’t have anything close to this in regards to organization*, Jon observed.

Coming in front of the largest pavilion in the castle, which was at its center and dominated the other buildings, Joon dismounted while Jon, Benjen, and Sam followed suit. Some soldiers eyed the three Westerosi with unease as they took their horses away, but the three merely followed Joon into the main pavilion, where two guards opened the screen doors while bowing their heads at their commander.

As expected, the pavilion looked much bigger on the inside than on the outside, with the spaces filled with various smaller rooms and a large open area containing many desks. Men were moving about, carrying out their duties, while the men in the desks were occupied with filling out whatever forms they had to sign. But they were using a system of writing that Jon was not familiar with, and he had a feeling that he would need to become good very quickly if he, Sam, and Benjen wished to survive in this land.

The four finally arrived at what Jon assumed was Joon’s solar, which had two large screen doors and guarded by two men armed with swords. They bowed to their commander after opening the doors and the three followed their host inside. The solar, or the Yi-Ti’s equivalent of it, had three desks, one larger than the other two, and all had scrolls atop of them along with brushes and pots of ink instead of quills. Mats on the floor took the place of chairs, but the room had an atmosphere that only came with spaces in which important decisions occurred.

There was also another man in the room, who was slightly younger than Joon but Jon could see that he was subordinate to their host in terms of rank. As soon as they entered the room, he stood up from his mat and dipped his head while addressing Joon.
“My lords, this is Kang Shin, Quartermaster-General of the Northwest Army and my direct subordinate. He served under my command in various campaigns against the steppe barbarians when we were both young cavalry officers,” Joon introduced him. Joon then introduced them in goryeomal, which was the native tongue of the eastern provinces, where Kang Shin hailed from. But Jon saw that Kang Shin eyed them with suspicion, not all surprising given that the three were foreigners.

Joon motioned for the three to sit on the three mats in front of his desk, the large one, while Kang Shin resumed his duties.

“Now, you came at a very auspicious time, my lords,” Joon said after sitting down. “Every three moons, the Northwest Army must conduct field exercises to remain in optimum condition and it is quite the event for smallfolk in the empire to look upon the men who are charged with their protection. Today is the final portion of these exercises, the cavalry maneuvers, and I invite you all to be my guests.”

“We’ll be honored to join you, my lord,” Benjen dipped his head.

“Excellent, which brings me to you, Lord Stark,” Joon grinned.

“Me?” Benjen asked with surprise.

“I have a situation in one of my brigades, which is the largest army unit directly underneath an army,” Joon cut straight to the point. “Its previous commander had been executed for embezzling funds for his personal uses instead of keeping his men in top condition for battle. Consequently, the fighting quality of the brigade at large has declined sharply. Its reputation became so low as to result in no officer willingly assuming command and a representative of the Imperial Army Quartermaster threatened to disband the brigade and cut the funds from the capital. Each army
must have twelve brigades at any given time and if one brigade is found to underperforming, the funds to this army will decrease unless I successfully overhaul it.”

Jon listened intently, as did Benjen. “I understand the situation, my lord, but I’m not sure how this relates to me.”

“We’re getting to that,” Joon answered. “As the First Ranger of the Night’s Watch, you have good qualifications for command and given that lack of officers I have at the moment, I can think of no one more qualified to restore the brigade than you.”

Benjen gulped. “I don’t know if I am qualified, my lord. I may have commanded fighting men, but I never commanded full-time soldiers. Moreover, I’m a man of Westeros and I don’t know if the men in this brigade will even accept me as their commander.”

“And that’s why I want you to take command of the brigade,” Joon replied. “I figured it was time to bring in some new blood around this place and your arrival is quite opportune for me. As Captain-General of the Northwest Army, I have authority to appoint individuals to command units where needed and under special circumstances. If you survived many years in the bitter cold of the Wall, surely the duties of commanding troops would be manageable.”

“That might not be enough to make these soldiers accept me, and I know very well that if men do not accept their commanders, they would most surely fail when battle occurs,” Benjen occurred.

“If I was making you commander of one of the abler brigades, that would be true. However, as this is a brigade threatened with disbandment and filled with soldiers not in prime condition for fighting, expectations would be low, so don’t expect very much. At the same time, it’ll be your responsibility to bring them back into proper battle fitness. I will give you someone to assist you in commanding these men as well as teaching you the intricacies of our culture, but the rest is up to you.”
Benjen absorbed what Joon told him to do.

“I see you’re still hesitating, so let me remind that you, as did your nephew and Lord Tarly, agreed to fulfill whatever duties as I see fit in exchange for inviting you all into my home. But I assure you that whatever duties I assign you would best fit the aptitude that you all have displayed so far. Your nephew and Lord Tarly will be back in Kushiro by the end of today, where I will assign them tasks around the castle, and you’ll be able to see them both while you’re here. Is that fair enough?”

Benjen still looked hesitant, but seeing the genuineness behind Joon’s words, he let out a sigh before nodding. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good,” Joon smiled and got out a scroll and brush. “I’m giving you a temporary commission as a brigade captain, awaiting official review and confirmation of rank before the Imperial Military Commission of Generals. Report for duty tomorrow and you will be given a uniform and officer effects. Understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” Benjen answered.

“You’re part of the army now, so you should address me as ‘general.’”

“Yes, general,” Benjen bowed his head.

Joon nodded in satisfaction. “Lord Tarly, you’ve showed aptitude in sums, which means you are more educated than most people I’ve met. I’ll have use for you here and at Kushiro, after you learned the basics of our tongues, in maintaining the records and our communications via scroll. For now, I’ll have you assist our quartermaster, Kang Shin, in ensuring that all of the soldiers get
“Thank you, my lord,” Sam replied with a bow.

“As for you, Lord Snow, I’ll keep you at Kushiro for now, where you will assist my master-at-arms and accompany me wherever I go. You have combat potential, but you’ll learn by observing how things are conducted here. Battle is bigger than the blade and a warrior must understand every aspect of war beyond battle, as wars can be won even if you lose every battle.”

That puzzled Jon. “How can you win a war if you lose every battle?”

“The fighting capabilities of armies is important, but just as important is how long you can maintain an army in the field, how well you protect your supply lines, and how much more information you can get on your opponent. ‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.’”

“Who said that?” Benjen asked.

“A great general who lived long before either of us, a rarity in the world of men but ultimately used by those with unlimited greed,” Joon cryptically replied before standing up. “Well, shall we witness the cavalry in action, my lords?”

Jon became more amazed at how orderly the forces under Joon’s command was even during times of peace. How they maintained formation, how they kept a consistent pace, and how well they remained focused on the objective… all of it put the martial traditions of Westeros to shame. It was made more impressive given that Joon commanded at least fifteen thousand cavalry at any given
time, and all of them were full-time soldiers. They were supported by thirty-five thousand infantry and five thousand missile troops, which puzzled Jon until he saw them equipped with a mixture of bows and what looked like short wooden clubs with metal rods. But Jon witnessed those weapons in action after two thousand men armed with them got into two lines, one kneeling and the other standing, and unleashed a torrent of fire and smoke onto hay targets. Their projectiles punched very large holes in them. *What did I just witness?*

“What are those weapons?” Benjen asked in awe.

“There are called tanegashima,” Joon explained. “It’s a new weapon being introduced into the army, and one in which the armies in the south and around the capital have readily adopted. This is merely a first batch to be adopted by the northern armies and used against the barbarians from the steppes.”

“But what powers them?” Sam inquired.

“Black powder, which is what makes the fire and smoke you see possible. And it is also used for festivities, where containers filled with black powder is utilized to celebrate some great event and to ward off evil spirits. You probably seen them when you all were on Leng.”

Jon remembered seeing such explosions, and now he knew what exactly they were.

“But whether these tanegashima would work on nomads who could move fast on horseback is to be seen,” Joon noted.

“Surely, such weapons would scare horses,” Sam pointed out.
“But can they fire faster or further than archers can?” Joon asked. Having seen how long it took for those troops to reload them, Sam couldn’t answer.

Joon took them around the military castle, where the three saw the kitchens, the training grounds, the various pavilions that each were responsible for an aspect important to the army like supply and weapon maintenance, they departed back to Kushiro for the day.

“Brigade Captain Benjen Stark,” Jon said proudly as they lay back in their room.

“I’m not so sure if I can be used to the new title,” Benjen answered.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, uncle,” Jon reassured. “So… what do you think of Lord Kitara now?”

“He certainly gets to the point, which is quite unexpected with someone like him. But as he’s a military man, that’s understandable. And very kind of him to show us around his headquarters and allow us a glimpse into the forces under his command.”

“But what about him personally?”

Benjen sighed. “Doesn’t remind you of someone, Jon?”

Now that he thought about it, Jon could see that Joon was similar to Ned Stark in a way. “He’s forthcoming, but he doesn’t waste time.”
“Exactly. And he loves his family, so that counts for something. But, as I said to you before, keep your identity close for now. Joon Kitara might seem a good man, but there’s still much we don’t know about him. Who knows how he would react when he finds out who you really are?”

Jon rested his hands beneath his head. “I understand that I have to much learn during our time here, but my aunt is still with the Dothraki and we don’t know how our family is faring back in Westeros.”

“We should trust the gods to protect them while we are here. We promised the Lord Commander and your uncle Aemon to return with help, so that’s what we’ll do.”

“I should say the same to you,” Jon pointed out. “Don’t get too comfortable in your new position.”

“I won’t,” Benjen assured Jon. “But if I can improve this struggling brigade, then we will be in a better position here in Yi-Ti and with Lord Kitara. From there, we will have more opportunities to get the help we need. We must play the long game, Jon.”

“Of course. While you command the brigade and Sam assists Lord Kitara, I shall commit my best efforts under his master-at-arms.”

“You do that,” Benjen said approvingly. “We all have our parts to play now, so let’s perform them well. You got that, Lord Tarly?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sam answered.
“Rest well. Tomorrow will be a big day,” Benjen managed before sleeping.

Indeed, it will be, Jon thought before closing his eyes. While he would not remember most of them, he dreamt of what he heard of his aunt Daenerys Targaryen, who heard of while docked at Volantis, and her silver hair and amethyst eyes stood out from the other things that were in his mind during the night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a slow-burn, but I wanted to introduce you all to the world of Yi-Ti as I would imagine it and from the rather scant details that GRRM provided in World of Ice and Fire. I introduced you all to the basics of the Yi-Ti military machine and regarding the culture, here is the structure for now: guanhua is essentially the ASOIAF version of Mandarin, spoken by the Ming Chinese court and in official settings, goryeomal is basically the ASOIAF version of the type of Korean spoken during the Joseon period prior to the 20th century, and nihongo is the ASOIAF version of Japanese and is the military language of Yi-Ti, which takes much from Japanese samurai and martial tradition as well as Ming Chinese structures.

Here, the roles are set: Benjen will continue his military career, but as a brigade captain (which is basically a colonel by modern standards), Sam will learn very much from behind the desk and mature into one familiar with politics and bureaucracy (don't worry, he'll have combat training), and Jon will learn under a samurai-like figure. Things can only go up from here.

Don't worry. The next chapter will be more fast-paced and really kickstart the plot.

And that last scene with Jon dreaming of Dany... just wait, all of you ;)
Unexpectedness

Chapter Notes

This chapter will kickstart the plot, and I hope I am showing the intricacies of the YiTiSh culture well (which I borrow from other Asian cultures in real life).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon’s arms and legs shook as he was forced on his hands and feet while making keeping his body off the ground. Only problem was… Hoon Ti had him do so by his fingertips and the tips of his toes. He had done this exercise with Ser Rodrik, but his hands and feet were usually pressed against the dirt. Emphasis during combat training was placed on the limbs, but never the fingers and toes. To Hoon Ti, everything could make the difference between life and death. How much longer do I have to hold this?

With Benjen serving as one of Joon’s officers charged with restoring his brigade to full battle readiness and Sam occupied with the Quartermaster-General, Jon was left to Hoon Ti, the captain of the Kushiro guard. The first time that he met Hoon Ti, Jon found him peeling an orange.

“So, we have the bastard son of a Westerosi barbarian gracing me with his presence,” Hoon Ti remarked while speaking the common tongue perfectly and keeping his eyes on the wooden floor.

Jon’s first thought was that Hoon Ti did not look because of he thought so lowly of him, but he noticed something else, something he had seen with Aemon. “You’re blind,” Jon realized.

“I see more than you can, boy,” Hoon Ti said before throwing his orange into the air, drawing his sword, and slicing through it twice before sheathing it and letting the orange fall to the floor. Four perfectly cut pieces were spread out, the juices oozing out of the each of them. But Hoon Ti surprised Jon by spinning around and swiping his left leg through Jon’s, making him fall on the hard wooden floor.
“No roots,” Hoon observed. “I sense spirit in you, white devil. Of the Maiden-Made-Of-Light and of the Lion of Night, I sense an abundance of force from the latter. But without the force from the Maiden, the Lion dies on the battlefield. I can see why Lord Joon would take you, your uncle, and your companion into this house. But I can feel you have many questions.”

“Just one. Are we guests, or prisoners here?” Jon inquired. “It didn’t seem like we had a choice in the matter in regards to the tasks we were assigned to, despite Lord Joon’s kindness in allowing us under his roof.”

“We are all prisoners here,” Hoon replied. “Those who enjoy privilege here, or those who are not here by choice, we are all one and the same. If you are unable to adapt to these lands and protect yourself, not only will you, your uncle, or your friend dies, Lord Joon and eventually myself… will follow. Do you understand?” Hoon came so close to Jon that their noses nearly touched, but Jon could see that despite the unseeing stares, being blind did nothing to blunt the sharpness of Hoon’s mind.

Jon nodded, which Hoon felt. “Good,” he continued. “We shall begin with roots,” before Hoon swiped Jon’s legs and made him fall to the floor again. “And you shall address me as shifu, understand?”

Jon got up and prepared himself before nodding.

For the past three moons, Hoon Ti subjected him to various physical routines, from stances that worked parts of the body that Jon didn’t know were there to having him run through the lush grasslands that surrounded Kushiro. Hoon Ti handled a blade with such fluidity and grace that Jon momentarily forgot he was blind, but such displays hid the power that came with each of his strikes. But the training swords that Hoon Ti made him use, different than the ones at Winterfell, took a long while before he got used to them.

Each morning after they broke their fast was occupied with a tutor teaching them how the three
main tongues of Yi-Ti. Guanhua was the common tongue of the Golden Empire, as it was used at the imperial court and in official communications. Goryeomal was the tongue most used in the eastern parts of the empire, but because the east was the second-most populous region, it was important for all to be able to speak it. Nihongo was the language used by the army and the fleet, as the Golden Empire adopted the military traditions of the Nihonjin people after seeing their effectiveness.

Jon, Sam, and Benjen all struggled with writing in all three tongues, as the rules for each were very different than the common tongue or even High Valyrian, which Joon Kitara surprisingly spoke also. There was a certain pattern to each stroke of the brush that had to be followed and anytime they got it incorrectly, their tutor would make them repeat one hundred times. Jon lost count of how many times his hands strained from the many mistakes he made.

Just as difficult as learning how to write was learning how speak all three of them. Benjen had someone who spoke the common tongue well, but if he wished to successfully command his troops, he had to learn how to speak without difficulty. Sam had to speak both nihongo and goryeomal with Quartermaster-General Kang Shin, as he was a native of the eastern provinces and mostly used the latter tongue for everyday conversations.

For Jon, he had to learn how to speak all of them, as he was confined to the castle and while Joon made the servants speak only guanhua, he also made Jon accompany him whenever he visited his headquarters or visited any of his officers posted to the borderlands of his province, particularly those near the northern steppes. He also had Jon make visits to the markets, ostensibly to purchase goods for Kushiro but in reality to force him to learn each language quickly. Jon remembered the first time he attempted to buy some silk from a stall.

“I… buy… silk…” Jon attempted in guanhua, prompting laughter from the merchant, who then derided him to the sellers next to his stall. The only words he could understand were “white devil,” which apparently was a common phrase for those that had managed to venture to Yi-Ti from the west. However, Ghost went wherever he went and when he saw that merchant daring to mock his companion, he bared his teeth and let out a fierce growl. The merchant’s face turned pale white and he just threw Jon the silk for no charge before scurrying to the back of the stall.

As promised, Joon Kitara began paying Jon, Benjen, and Sam their promised stipends, but in bundles of silver instead of gold. Joon explained that the main currencies of the empire were the
silver tael and the golden yunbao, with the former more commonly used. Each of them received two hundred silver taels each moon, which they could spend however they wished. Jon was about to question on whether Joon could afford to pay them each that much, only for Sam to tell him that the estates owned by the Kitara family brought in a total of fifty thousand silver taels annually after going through his financial records.

That was another thing that stumped Jon. Fifty thousand of anything was a lot of money anywhere, but besides the large castle resided by Joon Kitara, there were no rich decorations or other luxuries that characterized a lord of his standing. Instead, Jon found that Joon was a soldier through and through, as there were only wooden drawers, tables, and enough furniture for a castle as large as Kushiro. He also found many swords, bows, and other weapons that adorned a few of the rooms, which was understandable given that Joon was not the first soldier in his family.

However, he did find that Joon had a penchant for collecting cheongja, which referred to various pieces of pottery with a green glaze. The Lord of Kushiro said that even a small piece of cheongja was enough to purchase five thousand acres and only those licensed by the emperor could produce them, as any unauthorized manufacturing was punishable by death due to how valuable the pottery was along with their special production techniques. So Lord Joon does have some fondness for the material after all, Jon thought as Joon took the three of them to show off his collection of cheongjae that was spread out over the main keep.

Still, that was about as far as it went regarding Joon’s taste for substance. As the days went by, Jon saw much of Ned Stark in the Lord of Kushiro, as he never used his position to show off his power and status and only did so whenever one of his subordinates was acting out of line. During one of their travels to one of the outposts next to the northern steppes, Joon found that one of the chiefs of the Goi people, a client of the Golden Empire who provided expert horsemen for military service in exchange for autonomy, was expecting an increase in the pay for his tribesmen. In normal circumstances, Joon would have been inclined to consider his request, as the Goi were among the best cavalymen that the Northwest Imperial Army commanded. However, the chief overstepped his bounds and began talking to Joon as if he needed him. Jon didn’t understand everything that was said, but he could tell that the chief was unwisely trying to threaten the Lord of Kushiro.

Normally, such behavior would have prompted Joon to arrest that chief on the spot for insubordination. However, Joon merely took out his journal, wrote down a few notes, and spoke to the assistant quartermaster of the Northwest Army, who accompanied him, in goryeomal, a language that the chief did not understand. Jon also didn’t understand, but when Joon returned to that chief, he brought with him the imperial army commissioner, as every army had a
commissioner appointed to monitor the commanders on behalf of the emperor, and told the chief that the commissioner would conduct an audit of his tribe. The chief’s face turned white and after more words from Joon, the chief was silenced and he caused no more problems.

Joon explained to Jon that having a representative of the emperor conduct an audit was a headache for people like himself, but for people like the Goi, being audited was practically a death sentence. The Golden Empire had to maintain a regular and consistent taxation policy to maintain its roads, the army, the fleet, and of course the imperial family among other things. People like Joon Kitara and the merchants were able to pay their taxes and avoid punishment because they provided the paper and certifications that confirmed that they did. But for smallfolk and client tribes like the Goi, they could not provide the paper because they didn’t proficiently speak any of the tongues spoken by the Empire. If they couldn’t provide the papers, they had to pay an enormous fine, either in gold or in land. If they had neither, they had to sell their children or their women. If they didn’t even have that, they would be forced to the ground, their limbs and head tied to robes with small cuts to the flesh, the ropes fastened to a horse each, and each horse would be caned until the head and limbs were ripped off.

Jon shuddered at even the mention of that punishment, which he felt was too vindictive and extreme for those that couldn’t pay their taxes, only for Joon to remind him that things worked differently in the Golden Empire compared to Westeros. The Emperor of Yi-Ti was considered divine, and not paying taxes to the empire was considered treason, as it meant that the person in question was refusing to do his or duty. If the empire went soft on one who proved negligent, it would set a dangerous precedent and more negligence would follow, all of which could ruin the empire.

While Jon could appreciate the Golden Empire’s commitment to making their people fulfill their obligations, which he thought would’ve worked well regarding Joffrey, he also began to question on whether they were justified in acting the way they did. Granted, they were correct in instilling discipline and strong examples of duty among the people, but Jon wondered how long before it became too much. A thought for another time.

For now, Jon strained as his fingers and toes began to buckle under his body’s weight, something that they did not hold up before. However, he had a feeling that Hoon Ti was trying to teach him something about “roots,” which he said Jon lacked because of how easily he fell to the ground. So, Jon gritted his teeth and remained on his fingers and toes despite how painful it became with each passing second, and with each drop of sweat that fell from his brow.
“Up,” Hoon ordered, which Jon followed but slowly as he stood back up, only for him to swipe underneath his legs. “Still no roots,” Hoon observed as Jon tumbled over and stood up again.

Only a moon ago, Hoon began training Jon to fight using only his arms and legs. He learned how to block, strike, kick, and twist, but that wasn’t enough as he was going up against one who had trained from childhood to perfect his skills. He had also killed countless men before and blindness did little to blunt the sharpness of his mind and abilities.

Jon was on the floor after Hoon flipped him over. “Get up,” Hoon ordered. But before Jon could stand up again, Hoon kicked underneath Jon and made him fall again. “Get up,” Hoon repeated.

“We’ve been going at this for hours, can’t we rest?” That made Hoon stride quickly to Jon and slapping him hard on the face before stepping back, making Jon grab his face but also more frustrated.

“I did not ask to train you, you white devil,” Hoon spoke bluntly while rubbing his hands and walking around. “There is no honor in this for me.” As Jon struck, Hoon quickly avoided it and spun before pushing him away and making Jon almost trip. “Nor did the gods consult me when they saw fit to have you and your companions shipwrecked so far from home before throwing you in my lap.”

“I had to leave home,” Jon replied.

“So you say,” Hoon said. “However, I know that you’re not telling me everything, just as Lord Joon knows.”
“I’ve said all I can,” Jon lied.

“All you can?” Hoon asked disbelievingly. “Don’t you know that it is a great insult to lie to a blind man, especially one who can easily snap your neck?”

“I don’t know you,” Jon replied with the same honesty. “How could I know to trust you to tell the truth?”

“There it is,” Hoon smiled. “And you’re right not to trust me. After all, it was my own foolish naivety that cost me my sight in the first place.”

“What?” This was the first time Hoon opened up to Jon.

“Surprised?” Hoon asked sharply. “Out of all the things in this world, it was a rock thrown against the back of my head and hitting the right place that took away my eyes. And all because I wanted to help a child.”

Jon was shocked. “How did a child do this to you?”

“We’re not born free, Jon Snow, and that child was an example of that,” Hoon said cryptically. “I thought I could help her, but I underestimated how hate can overcome kindness and I knew from then on that there are some things in this world that cannot be changed by people trying to do good. All of us were tainted… when our ancestors gave in to their basest instincts and started killing each other over food, which they still do now. We kill each other because we’re hungry, for money, power, respect, and even our own shortcomings.”
“How can we be hungry for our own shortcomings?” Jon became very confused.

“You’re a bastard, Jon Snow. You might think that knowing who your mother was might make everything better, but the years being subjected to the irrational mistreatment of those that seek to put you down will make such a discovery hollow. And even if you don’t wish to be a bastard, will you let that go?”

“Of course I want to let it go,” Jon played along with his bastard pretense.

“But your entire existence was based on your parents not being married, and therefore your meaning was derived from it. People pity you, but they give you attention. Everyone in this world fears loneliness above all else and if they wish to use a bastardy stain to get attention, they would do it.”

While Jon was trying very hard to say to Hoon that he was wrong, many of his words were incredibly unnerving. While he stopped caring about getting attention from Catelyn Tully after her outburst when he was a child, he felt joy whenever Robb, Arya, Bran, and Rickon treated him like their brother. But he began to wonder if that would’ve still occurred even if was another man’s bastard or a trueborn brother.

Hoon surprised Jon by striking at his face, which Jon blocked and avoided. However, he failed to consider that he would merely reverse his strike, as he backhanded him, grabbed his waist, pulled him off the floor and spun him. He hit the ground with a loud thud, with Jon clutching his bruised ribs and shoulders.

“Get up,” Hoon ordered again. Jon struggled to do it that time, as his previous words began to seriously mess with his mind. “If you wish to survive in this place and find some meaning, get up at once.”
With some effort, Jon finally stood back up and straightened out his robes. However, a thought struck him. “Those words about being a bastard, were they to just mess with my head?”

Hoon chortled amusingly. “Now you’re learning, Jon Snow. You never allow your opponents to distract you with talk, as that it is the easiest way for them to enter your mind and kill you when all other options have failed. But don’t assume it was a tactical move on my part. I am training you, so I am merely giving more lessons.”

“I’ve made with my peace with being a bastard,” Jon kept up the charade. “It’s all in the past now.”

“Words from a boy,” Hoon assessed. “There is no escape from the stain of bastardy, no matter where you go or who you try to be. Unless…” Hoon narrowed his eyes in thought.

“Unless what, shifu?” Jon asked.

Hoon shook his head. “Never mind.”

“How do you know the common tongue?” Jon had to know.

“Hmmm,” Hoon simply said. “You might not believe this, but I was in Westeros many years ago, Sunspear if I remember correctly?”

That was something that Jon didn’t know. “You were in Dorne?”
“At the time, I was a foolish man trying to explore much of the world as I could before I settled in my prearranged station in the empire,” Hoon explained. “I was gone from home for nearly four years, but I was there nineteen years ago, during the string of events you people called ‘Robert’s Rebellion.’”

Jon widened his eyes. “You were there during the Rebellion?”

“I didn’t do any of the fighting, mind you,” Hoon answered. “But as I had learned, Dorne was the only place where I could stay safe as a foreigner, as anyone who didn’t look like a white devil were being killed on the spot by the followers of the stag king.”

“But the Targaryens had white skin,” Jon pointed out.

“But were they of Westeros?” Hoon asked, surprising Jon even more. “To the rest of that continent, they would always be seen as foreigners due to their silver hair, their violet eyes, their strange practices, and the fact that they created a throne from nothing. Don’t you find it strange that even with one Targaryen’s compromises, the lords and smallfolk of that land found one excuse after another to hate the Targaryens?”

“Doesn’t that describe politics?” Jon might not have known much about how lords engaged in politicking, but he knew enough from what he had seen in Volantis, when he heard about the many sessions held by the triarchs from ther merchants there.

“We’re getting off track,” Hoon avoided the question and Jon knew it was intentional. “I was a guest in the court of Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne, and I heard tell of a person they call the Mountain raping and murdering his sister and killing their two children. Child slaying is a crime anywhere, with penalties in the Golden Empire going up to killing your family if you had one and castration so that you wouldn’t pass on your ‘child slaying instincts.’ That was as far west as I went...
before returning home, although I did enjoy the pleasures provided by Dornish women.”

Jon sighed, not wanting to know the details.

“But that’s how I learned the common tongue, because I was in Westeros, at least a part of it. And that’s when I came to my first major realization.”

“And what would that be?”

“That all rulers, be it kings or emperors, are illegitimate. The family of the current emperor, the azure line, came from a general who rebelled against the previous dynasty whose name is a mere footnote in their history. We had two other rulers declare themselves emperors, one declaring that he belonged to orange line and another claiming that he descended from the yellow line, before they were put down and executed. The Valyrians destroyed the Ghiscari and then the Rhoynish simply because they could. We had your King Robert claim your iron chair because of madness of the ruling king and his heir kidnapping his betrothed, but such excuses would have made him a laughing stock in these lands, as we know that such claims are based on perspective. In addition, we have magistrates and courts to arbitrate any misunderstandings between noble families because we don’t resort to the sword as our first resort. Legitimacy is based on stability, which unfortunately relies on the moods of the masses. Kings and emperors rise and fall all the time.”

Jon became more surprised at how wise Hoon Ti was. It was still hard to stomach that the Mad King was his grandfather, but he never questioned the role of kingship. And here was a man who would openly say such words to him and speak of this emperor in such a way. Either he’s really brave and wise, or really stupid and foolhardy.

At the same time, Jon knew that not everything Hoon Ti said was true. As he said himself, it was all based on perspective and Hoon didn’t have everything, not even the truth that could’ve prevented the Rebellion from occurring, or did little even if it came to light. Will the truth matter now?
“I’m surprised you would risk speaking of your emperor in such ways as to imply that he is illegitimate,” Jon stated.

Hoon smiled. “Powerful men will always rule this world, but I am not stubborn as to believe that my views will always be correct. Even the oldest people in the world can find themselves... outmatched by the young.”

Jon wanted to know, but he had to be careful of what he said next. “What if... there were rulers who genuinely cared about the smallfolk, who don’t care about power, and only wish that their people could be safe from the dangers that would consume them?”

“And which rulers would you be referring to?” Hoon asked.

“Jaehaerys Targaryen,” Jon spoke.

“Ah, the Old King as they called him,” Hoon recognized. “As much good as he did, he failed to maintain the legitimacy of Targaryens for the following decades. He’s not a good example.”

“What if the rulers genuinely loved their people?” Jon remembered Aemon’s words on love.

“Love can be useful,” Hoon admitted. “But it has no place in ruling. There are the ruled and the rulers, and the latter must be cold and willing to kill if they want to survive.”
“But they’ll get killed themselves with that kind of attitude, if they everyone as enemies,” Jon responded.

“You don’t know the world, boy,” Hoon asserted. “Do you know why I have no friends?” Jon didn’t answer. “It is because my family is dead, and hate them or love, they would be there. Friends, not so much. Usually, the killers who come in the night were those that you would consider your friends.”

“But wouldn’t that make you lonely?” Jon couldn’t imagine Sam coming to kill him, even if he did have an inclination to violence.

“As I said, everyone is trying not to be lonely and our attempts to not be alone could lead to good or ill for us. But strength can be found when you only rely on yourself. Your uncle won’t be here forever and so will your friend, so there is only yourself to look after.”

“Words of a selfish man,” Jon declared.

Hoon grinned before stepping towards him, pinning his leg behind Jon’s, and pushing him to the floor, with their noses almost touching. “You have much to learn, boy. But I think that’s enough for today and here is the final lesson. You want to love others and give your all for them? You do that, but too much of it makes it meaningless. If you give coin to all those that begged, would you have any left?”

Hoon exited the training room and Jon was left to pick himself up.

Jon stewed over Hoon essentially making all of the years he trained under Ser Rodrick meaningless, as he just pushed him around and made him fall to the floor constantly. He certainly wasn’t prepared for the intense learning that Joon subjected him to in regards to Yi-Ti’s customs
and tongues. He heard that Benjen and Sam were having a better time at it, the former because his 
uncle had to learn to converse with his troops and the latter because Sam was just… smart.

As Jon leaned over the walls of Kushiro, he felt something lick his hand, or someone. Turning to 
his right, he smiled as he saw Ghost sitting and nudging against his side. ‘‘Good boy,’’ Jon rubbed 
his head. ‘‘Long day, huh?’’ He heard Ghost whine. ‘‘I know, boy. It’s hard and I don’t know why, 
but we’ll make it through.’’

Jon accompanied Lord Joon back to Tiqui, the first he had been to the town in three moons. While 
he had oversee tax collection and brought Sam with him, he got word that the magistrate was 
conducting a trial involving some Chogo woman, bitter enemies to the Goi in that the former 
accused the latter of being collaborators. Jon didn’t think much of it and merely tagged along.

After the taxes were collected in the marketplace, Jon and Sam followed Joon to the magistrate’s 
mansion, which consisted of low walls and a few pavilions. When they met the magistrate, Jon saw 
a fat and bald man with a double chin wearing green robes while smoking something on a pipe. 
However, Jon could tell that he was too comfortable in his station and took much pleasure in the 
opulence he enjoyed, from the many golden plates and decorations that adorned his walls.

‘‘My lord,’’ the magistrate addressed Joon in guanhua, who he hid his disdain well.

‘‘Magistrate,’’ Joon replied. ‘‘I hear you’re about to conduct a trial regarding some Chogo woman. 
Do you mind if I witness the proceedings?’’

‘‘You may,’’ the magistrate nodded while taking another smoke. ‘‘However, who are these white 
devils that accompany you?’’
“This is Jon Snow and Samwell Tarly,” Joon gestured to the two. “They are guests in my house and are assisting in various matters. I thought it would be a good time to show them how justice is carried out in the empire.”

“Very good, my lord. Foreigners should know their place here,” the magistrate set down his pipe and adjusted his robes. “Follow me, my lord.”

Jon sat beside Joon and Sam, all of them sitting on the left side of the magistrate. In the courtyard stood a crowd that had gathered out of curiosity to see the trial, including some who Jon assumed were from the Goi people.

“People of Tiqui!” the magistrate spoke to the crowd in guanhua. “Today, you shall bear witness to how those appointed by the emperor carry out justice. Any man or woman who dare to commit misdeeds against shall be dealt with swiftly and with full prejudice. Let this be a lesson to those that seek to undermine the rule of law in the empire.” The magistrate nodded to his factor as he opened a scroll.

“The trial shall now begin,” the factor said. “Bring out the prisoner.”

Two guards brought out a woman in chains and forced her on her knees, while the guards kept their hands on their swords. She was dirtied, breathing heavily, and her clothes worn out.

But, Jon saw past her filthiness and looked at her waving black hair, the penetrating gaze from her brown eyes, her white skin, and how resolute she looked. Her shabby garments did little to hide her well-defined features, her thin waist and core, and the firmness of her neck. He knew strength when he saw it, and this woman had much of it.

“State your name for the record,” the factor ordered the woman. When she didn’t respond, one of
the guards pulled out a bamboo stick and struck her in the back, causing her to yelp. Jon fought the urge to go up and stop them. *This is not how you treat a woman.*

“My name is Chanhee,” the woman replied in guanhua, briefly surprising the factor, the magistrate, and Joon.

“How are old are you?”

“Ten and seven.”

“You have been accused of assaulting an officer in this army’s cavalry,” the factor stated. “How do you plead?”

Chanhee scoffed. “I am not going to get justice here. That officer was a Goi bastard who struck one of my people and I had enough of their—” The guard struck her again, causing another yelp.

“I asked how you plead, Chogo,” the magistrate said.

“I am not going to give you the satisfaction,” Chanhee declared defiantly. Jon had to admire the spunk that this woman, Chanhee, displayed.

“So, guilty then?” the magistrate asked.
“Looks that way,” Chanhee shrugged.

“Very well. As the accused pled guilty, by the authority invested in me by the Divine Emperor, I sentence her to death,” the magistrate nonchalantly stated.

Jon observed this with shock. The magistrate was saying this as if he was consuming a dish and he was quick to condemn a woman to die, something that would not stand in Westeros. This is a sham! I have to stop this!

Before he realized what he was doing, Jon stood up, walked to the middle of the courtyard, and stood next to Chanhee, who looked at him with surprise as well as the guards, the people in courtyard, and the magistrate. Sam wasn’t surprised that Jon would try to defend this woman, but Joon looked livid.

“Sit back down, Lord Snow,” Joon ordered him in the common tongue.

“You’re going to stand for this, my lord?” Jon asked angrily.

“This is how the laws work in these lands, Jon,” Joon answered. “You’d be wise as to not interfere.”

“Do you think that this woman would commit a crime without good reason?” Jon gestured to Chanhee, who was confused as to what they were saying, as was the others.
“I don’t like the situation either, but I’m captain-general of the Northwest Army. If the charges are true, it is my duty to ensure that no one can walk away from striking an officer.”

“This is a mockery!” Jon spat back. “Murder if you can’t find a different word.”

“You’re just a boy, Lord Snow. You don’t know how the world works!”

“You’re the second person to call me that, and it is true. I may be young, but I know this is wrong and I have to stop this. Otherwise, it would be on my conscience forever.”

“What are you two talking about?” the magistrate turned to Joon while speaking guanhua.

“He thinks that you’re not giving this Chogo woman a proper trial,” Joon replied to the magistrate.

The magistrate scoffed. “What does this white devil know about how our laws work? Guards, take him away.”

Joon held up his hand, which stopped them. “As foolish as he might, he is my guest, so no one should touch him.”

The magistrate gulped. “As you wish, my lord. However, she pled guilty and the punishment for striking an officer in the emperor’s service is death.”
Jon understood the word guanhua word for death and shouted to Joon, “She doesn’t deserve to die!”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Joon said while going to the common tongue.

“Not true,” Jon shook his head. “Please translate this to the magistrate. ‘Where I come from, the one who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If he’s truly a man committed to the law, he should come down here and do it himself, if he’s so convinced that this woman is guilty. Otherwise, he should consider that this woman would not have done what others say she had done without fair reasons.’”

Joon was conflicted as to following Jon’s request, but relented after remembering his own disdain for the magistrate. He spoke clearly to the magistrate, with the guards and the other people shocked at Jon’s defiance.

“He says that he admires your gall, but that you should step aside before you say something you’ll regret,” Joon translated.

“What else did he say?” Jon noticed that Joon was leaving something out.

Joon sighed. “He called you a gwailo, which means ‘white devil.’”

Jon groaned. “How boring. Well, does he want to see something else that’s white?”
Joon widened his eyes. “Surely, you don’t mean to—”

“Don’t worry, my lord. I won’t kill him, but I have to show some strength.” Jon whistled and through the main door of the courtyard came Ghost, causing many to jump and the guards to back away. Ghost came in front of Jon, got into a pouncing stance, and growled at the magistrate, who turned pale white at the sight of the large direwolf. “Now, you want to call me a gwailo again?” Joon translated to the magistrate, who remained silent. “Release this woman, but I will show you exactly what a white devil can do.”

The magistrate scoffed one last time before saying something to Joon and walking from the courtyard. The factor yelled to the guards to release Chanhee, who unlocked her chains and stood her back up, while the courtyard emptied.

But before Jon could ask if she was all right, Chanhee punched him hard. Ghost was about to jump on her, but Jon held up his hand stopped him. Rubbing his face, he asked in broken guanhua, “What that for?”

“I need no help,” Chanhee replied, also not speaking good guanhua. “I need no white devil help me.”

Jon shook his head. “They kill you if not me.”

“What you care?”

“Could not let fake slide.”
“What you know, white boy?” Chanhee asked mockingly.

“Jon,” Joon came up to both of them while speaking in the common tongue. “Never pull off something like this again.”

“I had to do something, my lord,” Jon answered.

“You embarrassed the magistrate in front of the people of this town,” Joon laid it out. “He’s not going to forget this and you best be sure to not go after your ideals.”

“Is preventing an a fake trial an ideal, my lord?” Jon was shocked at how Joon was talking.

“You’re young and you have many preconceived ideas on what the world is, but you put your nose in where it didn’t belong and now the magistrate will come after you.”

“I don’t care about that fool,” Jon said.

Joon sighed. “Looks like you still have a long way to go. No matter, it can be rectified later.”

“My lord, what about Chanhee?” Jon asked.
“What about her?”

“We can’t just leave her here.”

Joon shook his head. “No, I will not extend my hospitality to a steppe barbarian.”

“Then why did you allow us into your home, my lord?”

Joon didn’t answer, but Jon could see that he was becoming increasingly irritated. “I’ve fought many years against these people and lost friends because of them. Why should I allow her to come into my home?”

“Would you rather have her be harassed by her rival people or those who are not as restrained in their hatred?” Jon pointedly asked.

Joon rubbed his temples in frustration before looking back at Jon. “All right, Lord Snow. I’ll let your woman friend stay with us, but you owe me now.”

Jon smiled. “Fair enough.”

“Use a part of your stipend to buy a horse for her. We’ll leave soon.”
There wasn’t much that Jon could say to Chanhee. She didn’t speak guanhua very well, which meant that he couldn’t talk to her. However, she was in deep conversation with Joon, who spoke in another tongue, one that Jon didn’t recognize. And Jon didn’t miss the contemptuous glances that she sent his way. *I saved her life and this is the thanks I get?*

At the same time, Jon could sense that there was something about this woman, Chanhee. Whoever she was, she had a strength that Jon didn’t see in many people, man or woman, and call it a divine event, but like their arrival in Yi-Ti, Jon felt that this woman had a part to play as dictated by the gods. *But what?*

“May I ask what you two were talking about, my lord?” Jon moved his horse up to the Lord of Kushiro’s mount.

“I spoke to her in her people’s language, which all officers stationed on the frontier have to know. The Chogo and the Goi have been at war for thousands of years, but both of them are the last normal people before those plains of the Jogos Nhai.”

Jon heard tell of the Jogos Nhai. They were described as squat, bowlegged, and swarthy, with large heads, small faces, and sallow-colored skin. Men and women both have pointed skulls, a result of the custom of binding the heads of their newborn during the first two years of life. Unlike the Dothraki, they do not make war upon one another, as their gods forbid them to shed the blood of their own people. Young men do ride out to steal goats, zorses, and dogs from other bands, while girls go forth to abduct husbands, but these are rituals are sanctioned by the gods, during which no blood may be shed. However, the Jogos Nhai do live in a perpetual state of warfare against all their neighboring peoples, and the Goi and Chogo were among them.

“I’m going to have to explain to my cavalry general as to why I am hosting a Chogo woman in my house.”
“Allow me to accept the burden of her upbringing,” Jon offered.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Joon glared at him. “You can barely take care of yourself, so now, I have to clean up your mess. Also, as consequence of your rashness, I will deduct twenty five tael from your next stipend.”

Jon sighed before nodding. “I accept your punishment.”

“Good. And let me remind you that while you are a guest, you will follow my rules. Fail to do that, and I shall remove you, your friend, and your uncle from my home. See how long you’ll last in these lands without me. Understood?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You better. However, my wife is the more magnanimous sort and she might overlook your moment of indiscipline while treating your Chogo companion with common decency. But make no mistake and don’t push my kindness too far.”

Jon looked at Joon and quickly saw another side to their host, one that he knew was there but had never seen till now. It was a look possessed by those who would stop at nothing to protect those that they loved and he saw Jon’s actions as jeopardizing that. He had no doubt that Joon was capable of killing them, but why wouldn’t he? *He wants to know what I’m hiding.*

Later that night, Jon came to the dining room in his robes and found Sam and Benjen already there. Sam was dressed in green robes and Benjen in his grey ones, and Benjen looked just as exhausted as he was. Jon also noticed that Joon’s daughters were still fidgeting nervously around him. Although they were terrified of Ghost, that didn’t stop them from following him around.
Also, Jon noticed Chanhee dressed in red and blue robes, was much cleaner, and her hair tied in a bun, all of which enhanced her lovely features that must’ve been characteristic of the natural beauty of the steppes. Jon sat awkwardly next to her, and he noticed that she was stealing a few glances here and there at him, guessing that he wasn’t the only one appreciating a fine specimen. That got some glares from Joon’s daughters. *This’ll get interesting.*

But on the table was a wooden boat filled with ice and adorned with raw fish slices.

“I hope you like fish, Lord Snow,” Joon said to Jon.

“If it is cooked,” Jon admitted.

“This is sashimi and this is a luxury that not everyone can afford, and not due to coin. It’s impossible to have fresh fish transported so far from the coast and still be good to eat. Consider this a true and proper welcome to the Golden Empire.” Joon clapped his hands and thanked his wife for the meal, with everyone repeating the gesture.

Jon still struggled with the hashi despite getting more comfortable with them, so he stabbed the first fish, a tuna piece, and placed it in his mouth. However, like Sam and Benjen, his friend by now becoming good with the hashi, he felt a weird sensation from the raw tuna that his teeth were trying to make into smaller bits. He never really tasted the ocean, but the scent was strong and spread throughout his mouth, causing Jon to swallow quickly but uncomfortably.

Joon chuckled, as did Seong, Komo, and Karasa upon seeing Jon’s stifling his coughs. “It takes some getting used to, my lords. But, this is fresh fish and only few can consume them. Also, my wife prepared this meal, so don’t show any visible rudeness.”
Jon nodded at Joon’s warning, but it didn’t make the task of actually swallowing the tuna easier. He endured more pieces of raw fish and fought the urge to excuse himself, as that would be rude since Myung Kitara would know why he would stand up and exit the room.

Jon saw that Chanhee was struggling as much as he was in swallowing the sashimi, but her pain was more obvious. From what Lord Joon said, Chanhee was to remain confined to Kushiro until he says so, but Lady Myung merely clothed her, cleaned her, and made her look like a proper lady. He could see that Chanhee was struggling with the new circumstances and shifted uncomfortably in the robes and skirts she had to wear, reminding him of Arya in that way. *I hope she’s okay in King’s Landing.*

“Oh, my lords. I apologize, but I recently received news from Westeros. Something I fear would interest you all,” Joon remembered.

“What do you mean you fear it will interest us?” Benjen was curious.

“The Lord of Winterfell, was his name Ned Stark?”

That caught Jon’s attention. Even though he wasn’t his father, he took him in when others would have killed him. “That’s his name. What’s going on?”

“He was appointed as Hand to the King to Robert Baratheon, correct?”

“Yes, my lord. What’s wrong?” Benjen wanted news on his brother.
Joon rubbed the back of his neck and pursed his lips, preparing for their reactions. “I’ve heard news that came from Asabhad, which told of something that would concern you both. Ned Stark is dead.”

Jon dropped his hashi, as did Benjen. Sam widened his eyes, knowing how important Ned Stark was to them.

“What did you say?” Jon couldn’t believe it.

“They say that he was attempting to seize power in King’s Landing and that he confessed his crimes before he was beheaded on the orders of Robert’s son, Joffrey Baratheon.”

Jon clenched his fist while his eyes watered, which Benjen also did. *That shit killed my uncle?*

“When did this happen?” Benjen asked firmly.

“I only heard the news today. I didn’t think much of it until I realized that Ned Stark was your brother and Jon’s father. I am sorry, my lords,” Joon offered. “And there’s more. His son, Robb Stark, rose his father’s banners in response and declared himself King in the North, while two other contenders are going for Joffrey’s throne. A civil war is occurring in Westeros.”

Jon stood up, unable to listen without his mind getting overwhelmed. “May I be excused?”
Joon nodded. "You may."

Jon walked to the courtyard, his tears finally streaming as he fell on his knees and mourned the man who raised him like a son. He knew Joffrey was bad news, but he never thought that it would be him who would have the gall to take his life. And he worried about Robb, who might have known how to fight and rule as Lord of Winterfell, but he was entering territory unfamiliar to him and he was only the same age as Jon. He feared about Robb handling the Boltons or other lords who would think him a green boy and would scheme against him.

Jon then thought about Sansa and Arya. Are they still alive? Did they get out of King’s Landing? He might not have liked Sansa very much, but she was still family. And Arya… Jon wouldn’t know what to do if she was dead.

Jon felt two presences come near him. He looked up and saw Ghost to his left and Benjen placing his hand on his right shoulder. He brought Jon into a tearful hug, both of them mourning the loss of Ned Stark and worrying about the safety of Sansa and Arya while Ghost tried to provide them with as much comfort as he could. Sam eventually came and placed his hands on both of them in a vain attempt to ease their pain.

But while Jon wept, he saw Chanhee watching them. Instead of being curious, he saw that Chanhee was looking at him with sympathy despite not knowing exactly why he was sad and not speaking the same tongue as he did. For a brief moment, Jon saw the Chogo woman in a new light, as she must’ve suffered her own losses just as Jon did now.

We must come back. We must come back, Jon promised himself. I will come back with an army and avenge Uncle Ned before I fight the White Walkers.
The actor that I use for Hoon Ti is Tom Wu and for Chanhee, Claudia Kim. Both of them appeared in MARCO POLO, which was a good show that depicted Kublai's Mongol Empire (even though there were many artistic licenses with history), and I
will use elements of that show for this story, along with others based around Asian history and culture.

Chanhee will play a major role in Jon's growth in YiTi and once they learn to speak with each other, Jon will learn much about himself because of her. And now, Jon has made an enemy, the first of many he'll make in the Golden Empire. Same thing with Hoon Ti.

Jon, Sam, and Benjen are slowly getting adjusted, but much more has to happen. And Joon and Hoon are suspicious of Jon, but they're waiting. Be wary of them, Jon, despite their kindness.

And that ending with them knowing about Ned's death... now Jon has more reason to go back with help.
“Good morning, Captain Stark,” Brigade Lieutenant Minoru Lim and Benjen’s direct subordinate addressed him in nihongo while standing at attention in the brigade’s headquarters.

“Good morning, Lieutenant Lim,” Benjen addressed back. Even though his hold on nihongo had improved over the last three moons, he still needed assistance on issuing orders to the troops from Minoru Lim, who spoke the common tongue very well.

Benjen was surprised to learn that Lieutenant Lim was actually not born in the Golden Empire, spending much of his youth in the Free Cities before his merchant parents settled back in Yi-Ti and arranged for him to take the military examinations.

“How did you learn the common tongue?” Benjen inquired of Lieutenant Lim.

“When I lived in Volantis, one of my tutors was an Andal from Westeros, the Arbor if I remember correctly. I learned the common tongue from him and it was quite useful when I lived in the Free Cities until I returned home. Good to finally find some use for it again, captain,” Lim answered. Benjen was still amazed that this foreigner spoke his tongue without any accent and could pass off as a native of Westeros if it weren’t for his appearance.

Benjen spent the last three moons getting acquainted with his new brigade. Out of the twelve brigades in the Northwest Imperial Army, the one he commanded was labeled as a “flying column”, which combined cavalry and infantry into one formation. As Benjen studied the military journals of the Golden Empire with Lieutenant Lim’s assistance, flying columns were formed after the imperial army discovered with disastrous results the limitations of pure infantry and cavalry formations. While infantry could repel cavalry charges given the right weapons and tactics, they couldn’t move as fast or maneuver as tightly as their horsed comrades. For armies posted to the northern steppes, having speed, mobility, and power all at the same time could mean the difference between victory and defeat against the superior maneuverability of hostile steppe tribes.

Flying columns were formed for this purpose, as they could move faster and perform tighter maneuvers than normal infantry formations while being able to sustain themselves against infantry engagements longer than cavalry formations could. A normal footman in a flying column was equipped with a pike and a dagger or axe while wearing a leather cuirass and sandal-boots, while bows would be used for archers instead of pikes. When Benjen wore the footman armor and sandal-boots, he was surprised at how light they were and how easily he could move through the steppes in the sandals. One problem with boots in Westeros was when a bannerman marched through mud, and if worn improperly, the foot would rot inside the boot. But for the sandal-boot, any mud would dry quickly and with their spiked soles, those boots could last for a very long time.
As for the mounted troops, they were usually equipped with a single-edged steel curved sword called a dao, perfect for slashing adversaries from horseback, two daggers, and a lance while mounted archers would use bows. They also had similar armor to their footman brethren, but they had leather guards to protect their shins, understandable given that the legs would be primary targets in anti-cavalry maneuvers. At the same time, the cavalry were also trained to fight off their horses, which was useful in the event that they had to support their grounded comrades.

All in all, Benjen had a total of five thousand troops under his command, divided among two thousand and five hundred infantry and two thousand cavalry. The other five hundred were missile troops, which was essentially a loose term regarding those that didn’t fight with swords or spears. However, he was quick to not underestimate their potential, as they were equipped with an advanced type of crossbow that could shoot ten bolts in quick succession and knew how to operate a wagon that had a hundred cylinders, each with what the Yi-Tish termed “fire arrows.”

One hundred? Benjen thought with astonishment. The wagon with a hundred fire arrows, called a hwacha, was designed to rain as much arrows as possible on fast-moving targets or dense formations. Seeing a demonstration, Benjen watched in wonder as one hundred arrows, all powered with black powder, flew through the air and landed over two thousand yards away. Two thousand yards! That’s five times the distance that any decent Bowman in Westeros could ever achieve. This is a game-changing weapon!

Talking with the crossbowmen and the ones that operated the hwacha, Benjen saw that they were among the most skilled and educated soldiers under his command. Besides years of training, one needed to have smarts and have aptitude with numbers in order to operate weapons such as the repeating crossbow and the hwacha, which is something that not every person in the known world possessed. As such, the missile troops received bonuses not even the cavalry possessed, which made sense considering that the army needed to keep their talented soldiers where they were.

Benjen also became aware that the tanegashima, an elegant weapon also running on black power made of wood and steel, was a game-changing tool from the first time he saw it on the army exercises Joon Kitara took them to. A footman need only a day of training at the most to be familiarized with it before being able to use it properly, and a mass of troops equipped with the weapon could cut down cavalry charges. However, as Lord Joon stated, they were untested weapons and thus only a small number of troops in the northwest army were equipped with them.

Benjen journeyed to Northwest Army’s headquarters after getting acquainted with the brigade and gained an audience with Quartermaster-General Kang Shin thanks to Sam, who was assigned to assist him in ensuring that the troops were paid on time and without any irregularities. From what he’d seen, Sam was adapting very well to the Golden Empire, as he was able to speak all three main tongues of the empire in a conversational manner after only three moons, and especially loved the food, which Sam said was richer and more diverse than anything he’d ever tasted at Horn Hill. As a Reachman, that was high praise.

“Captain Stark,” Kang Shin addressed him as he entered the room.

“Quartermaster Shin,” Benjen replied as Kang Shin bid him to sit on the cushion.

“What brings you here today?” Shin didn’t look up as he continued to write orders and look through various papers while Sam interpreted from nihongo to the common tongue. Nihongo is the language for the army.

“A moon ago, I’ve submitted a request to the general for my brigade to have five hundred
tanegashima, twenty-four hwacha along with two hundred and forty thousand arrows, and thousands of ceramic casings filled with black powder. I was wondering if the general received my request,” Benjen went to the point while Sam translated.

“He did,” Shin answered while still focused on the paper before him.

“And what did he say?” Benjen asked expectedly.

“Request denied, on the account of the scarcity of black powder currently controlled by the Northwest Army,” Kang answered.

“Hmmm,” Benjen nodded. “That’s funny, because I swore to have seen that the Northwest Army recently received two thousand barrels of black powder into its armory and that a new shipment of tanegashima was distributed amongst the brigades except for mine.”

Shin stopped making strokes with his brush, spurring Benjen onward as he knew that he got his attention.

“When I broached Lord Kitara on the subject, he said that he never received my request and that I should resubmit it through what he said ‘proper channels.’ Only recently did I discover that my request did go through the process before disappearing. Would you care to explain what happened, Quartermaster Shin?”

Shin stared at Benjen, giving off a rather annoyed expression. “Many documents get lost through the ‘proper channels’, Captain Stark, and the secretaries of the Golden Empire are not infallible. Mistakes happen.”

Benjen wagged his finger. “But not here. I did some looking into your background, Quartermaster Shin. You were among the top ten in your examinations group before choosing to take a commission with the army. You served under Lord Kitara in the cavalry before you decided that the field did not take full use of your talents, while military administration did. You started out in the commissary before you worked your way up to—”

“Spare me the listing of my accomplishments, Captain Stark. I know of all of them because I know my efforts got me here,” Shin interrupted. “What is your point?”

“My point is that you would not have got here if you allowed mistakes to happen on your watch. I’ve talked with the other brigade commanders and they told me that you never spent more than a week fulfilling any request that they made to you when it came to supplies or other administrative issues. And any time secretaries made mistakes you either dismissed them or had them reported to the commissioner. So given your background and how highly the other officers in this army speak of you, please elaborate to me why my request for more black powder weapons got lost in the process,” Benjen somehow already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from Shin personally.

Shin folded his arms before scoffing. “I trust you’ve seen the state that your brigade was in?”

Benjen nodded. Looking through the barracks and kitchens of the brigade’s camp grounds, he found that the troops had secondhand weapons and armor and that their rations were subpar, courtesy of their previous commander embezzling army funds before meeting his demise and the headquarters withholding the money needed for better rations and equipment. The troops were also unclean and undisciplined thanks to most of the officers being in on their previous commander’s schemes and purged. He also discovered that the only reason why Lieutenant Lim was able to remain with the brigade was because he cooperated with the commissioner and essentially sold out his colleagues, which would explain why the troops were wary of Benjen when he seemed so
comfortable with him. Looks like snitches are frowned upon everywhere, Benjen mused.

“Then you must understand why this army would be hesitant to fulfill your request for more black powder weapons, given that your predecessor abused his authority and his troops suffered for it. They cannot be trusted and black powder is a resource that must be used wisely,” Shin pointed out.

“Is my brigade not part of the army?” Benjen asked. “If you keep continuing to treat those men poorly, that’s how they will behave.”

“Wishful thinking, Captain Stark. Giving men a fresh start might have worked in Westeros, but give men that same opportunity here, they abuse it and the cycle has repeated enough times.”

Benjen sighed. “I was tasked by the general to restore my brigade to combat readiness and he gave me a lot of flexibility on how to get it done. I believe that the black powder request that I put in will help me achieve that.”

“Really? Now tell me. What problems did you exactly see in your troops?” Kang Shin asked.

“Well, I saw that their equipment was subpar, their officers are honestly not suited to command, and they are mostly unclean and fed poor rations,” Benjen listed.

Shin shook his head. “That’s only the surface of the problem, Captain Stark.” He then took a small cloth pouch and placed it in front of Benjen. Gesturing for him to open it, Benjen saw a golden-brownish paste and knew something about this didn’t smell right from how its scent.

“What is this?” Benjen looked at the paste.

“It’s called yapian,” Shin said. “It was originally used to treat diarrhea or to treat pain, but then someone at court found that yapian could be used for other purposes such inducing certain dreams.”

“Kind of like the milk of the poppy,” Benjen looked at the brownish paste.

“Exactly like the milk of the poppy,” Shin replied. “Considering that yapian and the milk of the poppy are essentially the same thing due to coming from the same plant.”

Benjen nodded, now understanding. “But what does this to have to do with my troops?”

“Well, this version of the poppy plant is much more potent in that it can be smoked and its scent inhaled. It’s also much more accessible than the milk of the poppy because alchemists found that it is quite easy to make large quantities of yapian. All you need is a few silver taels and you’ll be able to purchase two bags of that stuff. Your predecessor not only embezzled funds, but he was in a close partnership with several alchemists. He used his troops as customers while cutting in the alchemists with some of the profits. From what I estimated, he was able to clear fourteen thousand silver taels in total before his schemes were exposed.”

Now that Benjen thought about it, he did notice something strange among the troops. He saw a look in their eyes, a look that he saw when Maester Aemon gave Jon the milk of the poppy after he saved Lord Commander Mormont from that wight. However, Maester Aemon only used a tiny amount to treat Jon’s wounds while the troops looked a little too off for soldiers. He also remembered being repulsed by their smell, but something from their scent didn’t match dirt or shit. Now, I know what it is.

“So, you see, Captain Stark, given how widespread the yapian problem is among your brigade, I cannot allow the general to grant your request for more black powder weapons, not until you clean
Benjen narrowed his eyes. “I can’t help but think that there is more to this problem than just soldiers being addicted to substances. You said something about Westeros that wouldn’t work here and called it wishful thinking. Under normal circumstances, I would have ignored it. But considering how… unfriendly you’re acting right now, I have a feeling that you’re not processing my request because you don’t like me.”

“Yes, I don’t like you,” Shin quickly answered. Even Sam was surprised at how direct the quartermaster was being. “I don’t what prompted the general to grant you a commission ahead of more suitable candidates, all of whom took the examinations and spent years working their way up the chain of command. But I’ll be damned before I treat a white devil with any regard, especially one who is up-jumped.”

Benjen flared through his nostrils. “I understand that. But your prejudices are putting my brigade, the troops I command, at risk. Are they worth your dislike for me?”

“Your troops as you call them are merely chaff from the wheat,” Shin shrugged. “And also, you are inexperienced in this land and you’ll see soon enough why a gwailo shall not rise in the empire.” He then barked to the guards, who opened the screen doors. “You may take your leave, Captain Stark.”

Benjen stood up, exchanging an angry glance with Quartermaster Shin before leaving. He turned around saw Sam following him.

“My lord, I am sorry that I wasn’t able to temper Quartermaster Shin’s words,” Sam apologized.

Benjen shook his head while grinning. “I don’t blame you, Lord Tarly. You only said what was the truth and I am glad for it, because now I have a better understanding of the obstacles that are in front of me.”

“What do you plan to do? If that yapian is more potent than the milk of the poppy and your troops are addicted to it, you might face some resistance,” Sam explained.

“I can’t have troops under my command addicted to substances. It’ll take away from their effectiveness in battle,” Benjen responded.

“And as uncooperative as Quartermaster Shin is, he does have a point. We’re what they say ‘white devils’ and they may not follow your lead because of that simple fact,” Sam continued.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to charm them,” Benjen answered.

“What do you plan on doing?” Sam inquired.

“I’ll show the troops what a Stark and a man of the Night’s Watch can do on the field and to those who thinks that they can shirk their duties. They were not forced, but chose to be in the army and I’ll remind them of what is expected of those who decided to bear arms out of their own free will,” Benjen outlined.

Sam nodded. “Well, good luck, Lord Stark. I shall do what I can to change Quartermaster Shin’s mind, but do what you must.”

“Thank you, Lord Tarly. You shall hear of my progress tonight.”

Benjen rode back out to his brigade’s campgrounds. Shaking off the awe he felt at the Golden
Empire’s weaponry and military organization, he scrutinized the troops under his command more closely. They were unkempt and uncaring for their duties as soldiers. He also saw that they were eyeing him with indifference, showing how little they regarded him. How could I have missed this? I was First Ranger of the Night’s Watch and I dealt with all manners of men. It seems to not have been enough.

Benjen dismounted his horse and entered his command pavilion, where he was greeted by Minoru Lim. “Start talking, Lieutenant.”

“Captain?” Lim was confused.

“How extensive is the problem regarding the yapian?”

Lim blinked before sighing. “So you know.”

“I had more than a few words with Quartermaster Shin just recently and he told me that the reason my request for more black powder weaponry was denied was because of the yapian problem among the troops. So, how extensive is it?” Benjen was running out of patience, mostly due to letting his guard down.

“The previous commander ran a scheme that proved quite profitable. He cut in many of the junior officers and they distributed the yapian to the troops in exchange for their monthly wages. Yapian is quite addictive and I’ve seen the soldiers remain in their sheets while not maintaining their weapons properly.”

“Were you in on it?” Benjen asked.

Lim shook his head. “I’ve done many things in my life, but believe me when I say that I will never be in a position where I can take from the troops. Unfortunately, the commander did not share my thinking and I found out that he was going to create a ‘accident’ where he and some of the other officers could eliminate me quietly. Before they could, I fled to headquarters and informed General Kitara of what was going on. The next day, he rode with two thousand men and executed the commander and anyone else involved in the scheme on the spot.”

Benjen pursed his lips. “So, you snitched on your comrades in order to save your own skin.”

“It was me or them,” Lim defended himself. “And you can hate me all you want, but I was not going to die for their greed.”

Benjen eyed Lieutenant Lim up and down. He could certainly sympathize with Lim’s position, but snitches were looked down upon everywhere and who knew if Lim would snitch on Benjen if it meant saving his own skin.

“You help me root out the yapian problem, you will have gained my trust, Lieutenant,” Benjen offered.

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

“Where do the troops usually go to smoke the yapian?”

“Usually, the mess hall.”

Where they get their meals? Oh, this is bad, Benjen groaned. “Come with me.”

Benjen stomped to the mess hall, a pavilion also with screen doors but it only had one large room.
Sliding the doors open, he was shocked to see the room darkened and many of the troops lying on the wooden floor. On the many low tables were the smoked remains of the golden-brown yapian and the pipes that they smoked it from. That stench hit Benjen’s nose as hard as a blizzard north of the Wall and he fought the urge to allow any of it pass into his body even by accident.

But what disturbed was how… out they were. He had seen drunkenness in the tavern before, but the northmen were hard drinkers and could be counted on to either till the fields or wield the sword the next day. However, this surpassed all shock that came when Benjen witnessed drunkenness, as they all seemed to be still. It was as if their bodies were merely there while their souls were somewhere else and he couldn’t for the life of him understand how such a substance could have such an effect on a person. He did experience the effects of milk of the poppy, but the effects of yapian were much more potent as Kang Shin warned.

“They don’t even try to hide it,” Benjen fumed before turning to Lieutenant Lim. “Get them up.”

Lieutenant Lim shook his head. “Captain, it’s best if we let this run its course. No matter how hard we try to get them out of their daze, the effects of yapian are too strong to be overcome through sheer effort.”

“That’s because you haven’t tried hard enough!” Benjen finally lost it. He then went for the nearest soldier and pulled him up. “Get up, soldier! At attention!” Benjen yelled in nihongo. Seeing no response, he went to another soldier and found that he was also out. Running his hand through his hair in frustration, Benjen went to the well, pulled out a bucket of water, walked back to the mess pavilion, and splashed water onto the nearest soldiers.

“EVERYONE OUT IN THE ASSEMBLY AREA NOW!” Benjen shouted. At least that time, he got some of their attention.

“Who are you?” one of the soldiers who got out of his daze asked in nihongo.

“I am your commander, Benjen Stark,” Benjen said through gritted teeth. “Fall out now!”

“Piss off,” the soldier replied.

“I beg your pardon?” Benjen was shocked at the disrespect that the soldier was giving.

“We’re not taking orders from no gwailo,” the soldier answered.

“You are speaking to your superior officer!” Lieutenant Lim bellowed. “You will maintain discipline or you shall be punished accordingly.”

“And I’m not following orders from no snitch, either,” the soldier shot back.

Deciding that enough was enough, Benjen walked to the soldier, grabbed him by the robes, and threw him outside of the pavilion. Whatever soldiers were not dazed by the yapian began watching Benjen as he was about to lay a beating on the soldier who dared show him disrespect. He was their commanding officer, but this bordered on insubordination and he needed to show their consequences.

“Go ahead, hit me,” the soldier challenged. That confused Benjen.

“You don’t care that I lay a hand on you?”

“The previous commander did it. He withheld our wages and made us buy his yapian. He said that it would help us fight better, but it just incapacitated us. Some of us wanted our wages, but when
we asked, he just beat us along with the other officers. He said that we’re not better than dogs. So, you hit me hard, just like they did.”

Inexplicably, Benjen let go of the soldier’s robe and stared into his eyes. In that moment, he could see that while the soldier was partly to blame for getting himself addicted, he also saw hopelessness in his eyes, hopelessness due to the fact that their officers, the men charged with leading and protecting them, had abused them so. Even in Westeros, the officers could treat their men however they saw fit. Why is this place becoming more similar to home with each passing moment?

“What’s your name, soldier?” Benjen helped him up, thoroughly surprising him.

“Baekyong,” the soldier replied.

“How long have you served in the army?”

“Six years.”

“And when was the last time you were paid your wages?”

“Ten moons ago.”

“And that was when the previous commander started making you all consume yapian?” The soldier nodded before Benjen turned to Lieutenant Lim. “Do we have the coin give these soldiers their pay?”

Lieutenant Lim shook his head. “We’ll have to submit a request to army headquarters. But considering that this is a matter of paying the troops their overdue wages, it shouldn’t be difficult.”

Benjen rubbed his temples. “Is there any way that we can pay them now?”

Lieutenant Lim rubbed his chin in contemplation. “Now that you mention it, we do have a cache of silver notes that the army uses to pay its troops when it can’t pay in taels. The troops will have to report to the paymaster at army headquarters so that they can cash out those notes.”

“Good enough. Get a few of the men not dazed to round up the troops and have them report to the assembly area. Tell them that they will receive their wages,” Benjen ordered.

“What about the yapian?”

Benjen knew that as long as that golden-brown paste was in their camp, they could never perform fully as soldiers. “Gather a few other men and some of the officers, ones that you can trust, and collect all pouches of that substance. We’re burning them.”

“You sure about that, Captain?”

“I was directed by General Kitara to bring the troops back to combat readiness. I cannot do that while that paste is in our camp, so an example must be made,” Benjen explained.

Lieutenant Lim wanted to say more, but thought better and carried out Benjen’s orders. Some of the higher-ranked soldiers, who advanced up the army by staying past their eight-year enlistments, poured hot water on the dazed soldiers, which was enough to get them out of whatever the yapian or opium did to them. Using clubs, they forced all of the soldiers onto the assembly area while a few others burst into the mess hall and their living quarters to pile their many pouches of yapian in the front of the assembly area.
Benjen dressed in the armor of a Yi-Tish officer, which consisted of rectangular plates of metal that were riveted between the fabric layers and the securing rivet heads were visible on the outside. The shoulder pads and chest armor were adorned with the phoenix, a creature with many good meanings associated with it. The phoenix symbolized the union of the Maiden-Made-of-Light and the Lion of Night and each part of its body represented something significant. The head represented **virtue**, the wing represented **duty**, the back represented propriety, the abdomen spoke of credibility, and the chest represented **mercy**. *Great animal to use as a symbol*, Benjen mused.

Other components of his armor included a scarlet cape, a helmet also topped with a phoenix, and the leather sandals. He also tied the sword that he took with him from the Wall, the sword that saved his life on several rangings north of the Wall, including that one where he saw Othor die. *Keep focused*.

Eventually, the men were assembled, but were not at proper attention.

“Attention, brigade!” one of the officers shouted. They stood straighter, but Benjen could still see that they were loose.

“Soldiers, we have not been properly introduced and as your commander, the fault lies with me,” Benjen announced through Lieutenant Lim, who translated. “I am Benjen Stark, third son of Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. I have been appointed by General Joon Kitara to be your commander with the charge to bring this brigade back to full fighting capacity in light of your previous commander’s abuses.”

The soldiers still looked at him with apathy.

“Right, you don’t know who I am or who my family is. I am merely a white devil that knows nothing of how things work in these lands and considering your most recent experiences with officers, how am I any different?” Benjen decided to show how a Stark dealt with matters of importance, and they didn’t need any pretty words.

“To be frank with all of you, I don’t need you to like me,” Benjen continued. “I have no more desire to command the most miserable bunch of fighting men I have ever seen in my many years wielding a blade than you have to serve under a white devil. But those are your orders, and your orders are to obey mine. I have been through many a harsh winter and have seen things that you can only see in your worst nightmares. So I know the reality of battle and that every man only gets what he earns. If you obey my commands and follow my lead, I promise to mold you into the finest fighting unit that this empire has seen and to keep as much of you alive in the battles ahead.”

The men started to become interested, but it wasn’t enough. That’s when Benjen walked to the pile of yapian and poured oil on the pile from a bucket he took from one of the higher-ranked soldiers, prompting strong reactions from the men. “However, I cannot rely on you if you are continually in a poppy-induced daze. From now on, no yapian is allowed in camp and anyone who is caught with even a small amount will be punished accordingly,” Benjen warned.

“And what punishment are you thinking of, captain?” one of the soldiers shouted.

“Do you really wish for me to answer that question?” Benjen stared daggers at the soldier who dared to be audacious at that moment.

“What are you doing to do? You’re just a gwailo who’s not fit for command!”

Lieutenant Lim sucked in a breath, as did the officers. No matter their personal feelings towards Benjen, they would never dare disrespect their commanding officer in public. Either the
commander ignored such an attempt to undermine their authority, or they would deal with it quickly before it got out of control. For Benjen, he fell in the latter category.

“Come here, soldier,” Benjen controlled his anger while pointing to the spot in front of him. When he was being uncooperative, Benjen moved through the men and dragged him to the front by his robes. Then, he remembered that strength was usually respected at the Watch, so he decided to take that lesson to heart to put this soldier in his place.

“If you really think me unfit for command, then cut me, if you can,” Benjen challenged as he unsheathed his dagger and threw it to the ground in front of the soldier. The soldier blinked and he looked hesitant. “I see that you now worry about the consequences, but who’s going to tell on you all the way out here? After all, I’m just a white devil and any harm to my body will be seen as inconsequential, wouldn’t it?”

Benjen waited as the soldier took a few moments to make up his mind. Everyone watched nervously, never expecting the commander to display such recklessness in order to prove a point. Then again, I was part of the Night’s Watch. It takes a certain kind of crazy to want to conform yourself to a life of snow and to fighting wildlings.

Finally, the soldier went for the dagger, which Benjen sadly expected. Before he could start slashing with the short blade, Benjen easily caught the dagger before throwing a hard punch at his left cheek. He then kneed the soldier hard in the chest, causing the wind to be knocked out of him and to fall on his knees. Benjen then took the arm that held the dagger and twisted it in a way that caused a sickening crack, making the soldier yell in pain.

“Thank you,” Benjen sarcastically said as he took the dagger out of his hand and held it against the soldier’s throat. “What’s your name?”

The soldier breathed while trying to hide his embarrassment. “Gaoheng,” he finally replied.

“You done, Gaoheng?” Benjen brought the dagger back into its sheath and forced him up, Gaoheng still holding on to his twisted arm.

“Yes, captain,” the soldier finally answered.

“How long were you in the army?”

“Seven years, captain,” Gaoheng replied.

“So, you only have one more year before your enlistment is completed, correct?”

“Yes, captain.”

“And when was the last time you were paid your wages?”

“Ten moons ago, same as the rest of the men here. That bastard took our wages in exchange for the yapian and we thought it a good deal. However, by the time we remembered that we needed to send our wages back to our families, we were too much under the influence of the yapian.”

“Is that why you joined the army? To help your family?”

Gaoheng sighed. “I’m just a poor farmer, and whatever harvests I am able to obtain goes directly to paying taxes. As a soldier, I get a temporary tax exemption while earning twenty silver taels a moon, which is enough to ensure that my family doesn’t starve. I don’t how smallfolk such as myself are treated where you come from, captain, but we’re stuck here in this station forever. And
the yapian allows us an escape from our responsibilities, if even for a moment.”

Benjen then saw his troops in another light. Getting abused from their officers and from their society, these poor souls had no choice but to join the army, as there were no alternatives for them. He could sympathize with their desire to escape via the yapian, a purpose that drinking served back in Westeros.

However, Benjen reminded himself of why he got the pouches in the pile in the first place. Grabbing a torch, he threw it on the pile and the yapian pouches caught fire quickly.

“As I said, I will not tolerate any more of this stuff in this camp starting right now,” Benjen announced. “However, I will provide compensation to all of the men who suffered under my predecessors. Report to the Brigade Lieutenant Lim and he shall issue you backpay for ten moons in the form of silver notes. And as I said, follow my lead and you shall become the finest unit of warriors in the land.”

Benjen gestured to Lim, who ordered the brigade to fall in. That time, they all quickly followed orders and lined up to follow him to get paid.

Benjen watched as each soldier collected their silver note, eyeing each of them. Many of them were grateful to get their overdue wages while a few still stared at him uneasily. He was going to have his work cut out in the moons ahead.

Jon watched as Benjen studied the manuals of Golden Empire more deeply. Of course, he had Sam to help him understand each of the texts, but he was picking up each of the tongues very quickly.

Benjen specifically was looking over the manuals that covered the black powder weapons. After a closer inspection of them, he found that the black powder weapons used by the army were inaccurate at long range. Moreover, the hwacha was only meant to rain down as many arrows over a wide area to scare off fast-moving targets, not to kill with every arrow. The tanegashima were slow to load and their firing mechanisms consisted of a burnt rope that touched a bit of black powder, setting off a spark that fired the weapon but the powder was susceptible to wind, rain, or other natural conditions. Furthermore, black powder weapons might have been easy to use by the common footman, but they were heavy and the tanegashima needed a metal pole or some bamboo stand to make it easier for the footman to hold it and be accurate.

“No wonder Lord Joon was hesitant to use more black powder weapons,” Benjen thought aloud. “Each tanegashima weighs about ten pounds, while a longsword only weighs three. A Bowman could let loose fifteen arrows in the time a gunner would take to load, charge, and fire once. Most importantly, the effective range for the tanegashima is only up to three hundred feet compared to one thousand and two hundred for bowman, and that distance is enough a lead ball to be easily deflected by decent armor. How could I have missed this?”

Jon never expected to see this side of his uncle. He saw him be great warrior and a good leader, but he never thought him to be meticulous. Then again, being in a new land and commanding new troops must’ve brought out sides to his uncle out of necessity.

“Anything that I can do to help, Uncle Benjen?” Jon offered.

“You focus on what you have to do, Jon,” Benjen kept his eyes on the manuals. “This is my concern, Jon, and therefore my burden.”

“As you wish, uncle,” Jon nodded before standing up from the wooden floor.
Jon went outside Kushiro’s main keep. It was night and looking up, Jon was struck at how clear the sky was. He could see thousands upon thousands of stars, which was always a mesmerizing sight no matter where he was in the world.

Jon then walked over to Ghost, who was moving around the courtyard. “Hey, boy,” he brushed his hand across his head and his back. He noticed that Ghost was feeling happier than usual, judging from how he trotting around and from his faint grin. “You seem pretty happy tonight. What’s going on?”

Ghost looked at a corner of the courtyard and Jon saw Chanhee walk over to the direwolf. What surprised Jon was how… relaxed Ghost was around her. It had only been a few weeks since Chanhee arrived at Kushiro, but she had fell naturally into the flow of the place. Lady Myung had her work in the kitchens and handle the laundry while Lord Joon became curious as to how able the Chogo woman was with arms.

Unsurprisingly, Chanhee performed terribly with Hoon Ti. However, she had tenacity and continued to fight even though she had no weapons and was battered. Hoon Ti said to her in the Chogo tongue, “You have spirit, Chanhee. But you are like Jon Snow here, in that you are in circumstances beyond your comprehension.”

As for Jon, he trained more intensely under Hoon Ti ever since he received word of Ned’s death. Besides bringing help, Jon needed to improve himself, both mentally and physically, and thus requested Hoon to make his training harder. Strangely, Hoon complied and told him that personal losses are powerful incentives to self-improvement. Jon took his word for it, as he already knew some part of Hoon’s own personal losses.

By this point, Jon was able to run fifteen miles through the grasslands a day and able to withstand the various poses and forms that Hoon subjected him to. However, during one session, Hoon said to Jon when he asked when they would practice with real weapons, “Patience, Jon Snow. I understand what loss can do, but as I had to learn, slow is fast and fast is slow. Take your time with each stance and make sure to get the form right.”

“Shifu, my family is suffering back in Westeros. I cannot wait for long to get back there,” Jon answered.

“Spoken like a man devoted to his family,” Hoon chuckled. “And yet spoken like a young man with nothing holding him back. A dangerous combination and too often has this world seen the consequences of such.”

“What do you mean?”

“To make this more apt, let’s talk about Rhaegar Targaryen.”

*My father*? “What about him?”

“I’ve heard tell of who the last scion of House Targaryen was. A great warrior, a master at the harp and song, and a loving father. However, he was just like every other young man who didn’t think of the consequences of their actions. Personally, I don’t believe it when people say that he kidnapped Lyanna Stark.”*My mother*. “Such an act is against everything I was told of him. However, he grew up entitled and was born at the top of the hierarchy. All of his needs were attended to and he could expect to inherit the throne when his father, the so-called Mad King, passed on.”

Jon listened intently.
“I don’t know exactly what happened during the Rebellion, but all of his actions were irresponsible and his family paid for it. He became weakened by a false sense of security and he died for that.”

Jon winced at how lowly Hoon talked of his father. He couldn’t deny that some of his words made sense, but at the same time, he didn’t know everything.

“He allowed his heritage and his confidence to rule his mind, but he must’ve forgot how powerful hate can be and Robert Baratheon was full of it for him. He should have waited for a more opportune moment instead of meeting at the Trident, and he paid for his impatience with his life,” Hoon continued.

Jon gulped. That last part, he couldn’t deny.

“So, you see. Impatience and haste is the ruin of many men and I’ve seen that happen too often. Trust me when I said slow is fast and fast is slow.”

That’s what Jon followed. He exhibited patience and carefulness whenever he trained, putting aside his desire to hold weapons and ultimately Longclaw and Dark Sister.

Hoon is wrong about my father, because he doesn’t know everything. But would it matter if he knew the truth?

Going back to Ghost and Chanhee, Jon continued to pet his direwolf while Chanhee smiled at Ghost.

“You… pet… if… wish,” Jon said in broken guanhua.

“Really?” Chanhee asked, surprised. Jon nodded, while Chanhee placed a hand on Ghost’s head. To his relief, Ghost basked in the attention of the newcomer.

Jon was still not good in any of three tongues, but he was improving. However, here was a woman who had spirit and was not bad to look at and he couldn’t find a way to talk to her fully. Jon felt that this was perhaps what loneliness was, being around people who couldn’t understand. No, I’m not alone. I have Sam, Uncle Benjen, and my family back in Westeros. I also have Aunt Daenerys, wherever she may be.

“Well, Uncle Benjen is settling in quite well with his troops and Sam is doing very good so far,” Jon talked aloud. He knew that Chanhee would not understand him, but it still felt good to talk to someone other than himself. “And I just completed another day of training. Robb is King in the North and I don’t know what happened to Arya and Sansa. I hope Bran and Rickon are doing all right back in Winterfell. And my family is scattered all over the world.”

Family. Before I came here, I found out something that shocked me. And I thought that my family in Winterfell was my flesh and blood. They are, to a point, although Winterfell was never home. And yet, I still feel anger at the one who took away the man who was a father to me. The man didn’t sire me, but he protected me all the same and I feel angry that I am not there to help avenge him.”

Jon could only imagine what they did to Ned’s corpse after executing him in King’s Landing.

“My shifu is saying things that make me question what I know, but I also know he doesn’t hold all of the facts. I guess that’s one of the great mysteries of the world, knowing when to heed sound advice and when to hold on to something you know in your heart to be right. Uncle Benjen said that the gods have a purpose for all of us, but why have we come here? And what’s worse, I’m saying all of this and you can’t understand me.”

Jon knew that he had no right to feel bitter, as Chanhee was only listening. But it didn’t do much to
lessen his frustration.

“But I do,” Jon turned around and saw Sam, who surprisingly had Seong beside him.

“Sam? What are you doing out?”

“I could ask the same of you, although you already have company,” Sam pointed out.

“Looks like Ghost likes our new woman guest,” Jon quipped.

“I was talking to Seong about Ned Stark and he has something to say to you,” Sam said.

Jon raised his eyebrows, surprised that the son of Lord Joon wanted to have words with him.

“Okay. What does he want to talk to me about?”

Seong spoke in guanhua, which Sam translated. “There is an old story that talks about men avenging a man they held dear. There was a lord that visited the imperial capital on official business and while there, one of the most senior court officials began to taunt and offend him. The details are not clear, as people are divided on whether the official may have simply ridiculed the lord or if the official may have demanded unacceptable bribes. Either way, the lord lost patience with the official, drew his blade, and cut the official across the face.”

Jon became more interested in Seong’s tale.

“That lord was immediately arrested and was told by other court officials that drawing a blade within the imperial palace was a crime punishable by death. That lord was sentenced, on the spot, to commit a ritual suicide, which involved sticking a blade into one’s midsection and cut out his own innards. The lord did as he was ordered. His lands were forfeit, and his family was ruined,” Seong continued through Sam.

Jon shook his head, not satisfied with how the tale was progressing. However, he kept his mouth shut and allowed Seong to continue.

“On the lord’s death, the 300 retainers loyal to him became without a master, which is a fate that the Yi-Tish consider very dishonorable. However, forty-seven retainers considered it a grave injustice that the official was left unpunished and they resolved to restore honor to the name of their lord and his house.”

Jon kept his hand on Ghost’s head, eager as to where the tale would end.

“However, the official was feared reprisals and had increased his personal bodyguard, which prompted retainers to split up. Some took jobs as workmen. Others became monks. Their leader settled in Asabhad and fell into debauched ways: drinking, gambling, and partying night after night with prostitutes. One man from his province was so disgusted on finding the leader drunk in the gutter that that he struck him and spat on him for failing in his duties as a warrior. The official’s spies reported all this back to him and after several months, he concluded that the warriors had started new lives and therefore reduced his security."

But that wasn’t the case, was it?

“Meanwhile, some of the retainers had taken positions as craftsmen in the official’s household and learned its layout from the inside out. When the time was right for action, the leader travelled from Asabhad to the capital, and the warriors assembled for a final meal, aware that it would be their last. The next morning, they stormed the official’s household and were mindful not to harm any innocent bystanders.”
Done like true warriors, Jon mused.

“When they finally cornered the official, the leader addressed him respectfully and explained they were there to avenge their lord. The leader invited the official to commit ritual suicide, but when he refused, he cut off his head and washed it before taking his head to his lord’s grave. The warriors then paid the temple monks for their own burials before turning themselves into imperial officials. They were found guilty of murder and all committed suicide together.”

That’s it? Jon was rather disappointed at how that ended. Usually, the stories Old Nan told him ended with the heroes triumphing and living the rest of their lives in peace. But not this one.

“What was the point in them avenging their lord if they died anyway?” Jon asked with exasperation.

“The point of this story is that justice might come slow, but it comes eventually,” Sam translated Seong’s words. “Your Ned Stark was executed in the same manner, but you won’t do him or his family any good by going back so unprepared. Take the time you have and then strike back.”

Jon was still in his youth and it was hard for him to take his time with anything. However, considering that Seong was the second person to say that to him, he began to realize the truth in their words.

“And so,” Seong suddenly said in the common tongue. “You… be… ready… to… revenge… Stark.”

Jon nodded, holding out his hand. “Thank you, Lord Seong.”

Seong dipped his head. “No… mention.”

Jon also dipped his head in respect.

Time… Suddenly, a thought crossed Jon’s mind.

“Sam, just curious. Did you notice anything strange when I was burnt by that lantern?”

Sam was confused at the sudden change in the conversation. “Um, you’re hand was singed, but it recovered pretty quickly. Why do you ask?”

“Regarding my… family,” Jon was careful not to make any direct reference to his Targaryen heritage. “Was it a common trait for them to be unburnt?”

“Not every one of them had it,” Sam answered. “Do you think you have it?”

“Let me try,” Jon quickly walked to the nearest brazier, with Ghost, Chanhee, Sam, and Seong following. He held out his hand to the flame, slowly moving it over the fire.

“Be careful, Jon,” Sam warned.

Jon then had his hand immersed in the flame, to the shock of Seong and Chanhee. While the first time he touched that lantern was… painful if lacking a better term, he only felt a certain heat this time. Pulling his hand out before it became more than uncomfortable, Jon saw that there were only slight blisters and burns on his hand. When he touched it, he didn’t feel much pain.

So does this mean… Jon looked at Seong, Sam, and Chanhee, all three of them showing looks of unbelief at his hand and what he just did.
“Your hand be more burnt than that and your skin should be peeling,” Seong exclaimed while Sam interpreted.

Jon could only assume that given the time he had to accept his Targaryen heritage, it must’ve unlocked certain aspects that he didn’t existed.

“What… going… on?” Chanhee asked.

“I don’t know,” Jon shrugged.

Meanwhile, Joon looked at the sight with interest. Initially suspicious of Jon, he now had proof that there indeed was more to Jon than he was telling him. **Only a few people in the world could escape a flame relatively unharmed.**

Joon walked back to his room, contemplating on what should be done about the new discovery.

**Chapter End Notes**

Regarding that tale, yes. I basically copied the 47 Ronin. But I feel that the quintessential Japanese tale is apt for this story, particularly Jon's training.

Benjen is having difficulty commanding his troops, but he's taken the first productive step into molding his brigade back into a fighting unit. And I hope that I explained well on the limitations of the gunpowder weapons (for those wanting to see more medieval combat, don't worry. We'll see plenty of that)

Jon is also bonding with Seong and Chanhee. Three guesses on the purpose of Chanhee in the story ;)

Also, regarding the unburnt trait, it'll be explained more. But now, Lord Joon is suspicious and it won't be long before he decides to dig for the truth.

Again, stay safe in this crazy situation.
Meditation in the Temple

Chapter Notes

Hope you are all staying safe from the coronavirus. Given that everything is on lockdown, we can only hope for the best and that the virus ends soon.

On the bright side, I get to focus on writing. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam sifted through the various papers on the low table as he sat across Quartermaster Shin in his room. He was thankful for the cushion on the floor, as he had never sat on the floor before and knew he would experience discomfort after only a few minutes. He had to sit for what he assumed were several hours, going through tedious matters such as soldiers’ pay, commissary affairs, and other matters pertaining to army supply.

However, occasionally, Kang Shin asked for Sam’s help in cross-referencing what he called the “tip scroll.” Sam was confused at the simple title for what Shin treated as an important set of scrolls, but that was before he looked closely at what the scrolls contained. Judging from how the characters were arranged, they formed names and particular numbers. Sam then cursed himself for overthinking the scrolls’ meaning, as “tips” referred to exactly that, information offered by certain people and the numbers were amounts paid to those people for their information.

Sam found out from the other administrative officers that the Quartermaster was also involved in intelligence affairs aside from ensuring that the army remained sufficiently supplied. It made sense to Sam, as information from the field and other threats to the army would affect the supply trains and networks. Most of the sources were civilians, people who lived outside headquarters but were close enough to be reached by the quartermaster’s subordinates.

Sam talked to the other officers who worked for Shin and learned that the most important sources were those from the steppes, as they were in a good position to monitor the movements of steppe tribes such as the Goi and the Chogo. Even though the Goi were clients of the empire, it was no secret that a few of the tribal chiefs were unhappy at what they perceived as “collaboration with the southern enemy” and thus they had to be watched to ensure that none of the more influential chiefs would step out of line. As such, sources from the steppes were paid handsomely.

With so much information coming in, Sam questioned on how to identify which information was accurate and had veracity and which contained lying and unnecessary details. That was where Shin came in, stated the other officers. He organized the reports based on dates and locations and examined those that came within a few days of each other at most and from roughly the same place. If both reports stated similar things, then the tip was considered reliable and thus included in Lord Joon’s daily briefing, which was also attended by the other senior officers and commanders in the Northwest Army.

As intelligence was considered a vital area of the army, Quartermaster Shin had access to large portion of the army’s funds, roughly one thousand tael a moon for tips alone. Besides making sure the soldiers were paid on time, Sam had to ensure that the sources were paid accordingly and that there was no inflation in the amounts. At least I’m not freezing in the cold and being made to wield a blade, Sam thought on the boredom of his current duties.
“Remind me again where you’re from, Tarly,” Shin spoke to Sam in goryeomal. As a native of the eastern provinces, that was the tongue he was most comfortable with.

Sam took a moment to find the words. “I am from Horn Hill, Quartermaster.”

“Where in Westeros is that?” Shin kept his focus on his papers.

“In the southern parts, in the Red Mountains of the Dornish Marches to be exact,” Sam said slowly.

“Ah,” Shin nodded. “From what I’ve read of Westeros, the Dornish Marches is a hostile place and that those who live there have a reputation developed from fighting various conflicts with each other. Is your family such people, Tarly?”

“You could say that, Quartermaster,” Sam replied sheepishly.

Shin set down his brush and looked at Sam in the eyes. Sam almost flinched from how piercing Shin’s gaze was, and could sense malice behind them. It was the same malice that Sam saw whenever Alliser Thorne looked upon him and Jon.

“Don’t do that, Tarly,” Shin shook his head.

“Do what, Quartermaster?” Sam was getting nervous.

“When I ask you a question, you either answer fully or not at all. Don’t give me half-answers like some cretin,” Shin spoke.

Sam gulped. “I’m sorry, Quartermaster.”

“Don’t apologize. Just answer my question again.”

Sam set down his brush. “Yes, my people do have roots in the Dornish Marches. My family, my house, is one of the major lords in that region.”

“And let me guess. Your father is a warrior but you’re not and he’s disappointed that you are not built for combat. You were more inclined to the brush and paper and for that, he treated you very badly and that’s why you’re here. Did I miss anything?” Shin asked.

Sam’s eyes widened. How did he know? He knew that Quartermaster Shin could read people, as that came with his duties of ensuring the army was supplied and looking over intelligence reports, but he didn’t know that Shin was that good.

Shin scoffed. “Of course. Such a shame, really. The quibble or brush can determine the fate of more lives than a blade ever could and thus your father proved his stupidity by rejecting you.”

Sam blinked. “Stupidity?”

Shin sighed. “That’s the problem with men in general. They cannot see past what’s in front of them, be it with their blades or with their cocks, and your father and family are no exception. I should know because I used to be one of them.”

Sam nodded. “I know, Quartermaster Shin. You served in the cavalry under Lord Joon before you decided that being in administration worked better for you.”

“But that’s not everything. I realized that as a soldier, I might determine the fate of one man, three at the most, but the world will keep marching on. With the stroke of a brush, thousands of lives are affected. And that is power, Tarly, a concept many might think they understand but few actually
“do,” Shin explained.

Sam narrowed his eyes. “So is that why you went into administration? To have power?”

Shin pursed his lips. “The empire might not have nobility that can command armies like in Westeros, but they still hold considerable influence at court and in its many establishments. The general might have passed the examinations, but then again, men like him are guaranteed to pass since they had the resources and time to prepare since birth. As for me, I come from rice farming stock and the only reason why I was able to pass was because the monks at the village monastery helped me.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Sam asked with surprise at Shin revealing much about his background.

“Because I want to say that I am better than you in many ways that you cannot imagine and also General Kitara,” Shin answered.

Sam frowned. “Because you were not nobility but you still were able to rise through the ranks to become Quartermaster? And you think that makes you better than me?”

“No matter how your father treated you, Tarly, you lived an existence more comfortable than most people, people that you would never meet naturally,” Shin pointed out. “You had servants and people you can call on. For me, I had to earn my way in this world and it wasn’t handed to me on a platter. And I was able to push through that impenetrable barrier that divided those who ruled from those who are ruled. Would you be able to do that if you were in my position?”

Sam took a moment to form his answer. “Maybe not,” Sam admitted. “But there are some things that you cannot attain from sheer effort alone.”

“And what would that be, Tarly?”

“You might have worked your way up the ladder and obtained a powerful position, so I applaud you for your efforts,” Sam commended Shin. “However, you were part of the ruled as you say and learning how to be among those who rule is not something that you can learn by yourself. One mistake, and you’re cast out with little chance of returning. And what will you say of your efforts then?”

Shin’s jaws tightened. Oh, you haven’t thought about that possibility, have you?

“And what would a white devil like yourself know about effort?” Shin scoffed.

Sam shook his head. “I might be young and inexperienced with the world, Quartermaster, but I know what nobility and seen the effects of power. You only know an idea of it and that’s not the same.”

Shin suddenly stood up. “I’ve just remembered something. I have to meet with General Shun to answer his issues with the cavalry’s conditions. Therefore, I must delegate the completion of the rest of today’s expense reports to you.”

Sam’s eyebrows were raised in confusion. “That’s going to take me more than a few hours, Quartermaster, and we’re already past midday. I have to return to Kushiro by dusk.”

“Then you better get work quickly but efficiently then,” Shin told him before moving out of the room.
Sam sighed. Why didn’t I keep my mouth shut? Lord Joon gave him duties to fulfill and Sam was going to see them done, even if some of those duties were imposed upon him out of pettiness.

On the other hand, Sam was getting better at reading the Yi-Tish tongues and decided to see this as a chance to get a completely good hold on them.

After the day’s work was done, a courier was responsible for submitting them to the Adjutant-General of the Northwest Army, who managed all administrative matters for General Kitara. However, Sam decided to form his own relationship with the Adjutant and walked to his room himself.

Sensing the unease by the guards outside of the door at the sight of a ‘white devil’ despite being there for three moons, Sam told one of them, “I have the scrolls that Quartermaster Shin told me to deliver to Adjutant Dae. I am here to deliver them personally.”

The guard hesitated before announcing Sam’s presence through the screen door. After hearing Dae bidding Sam to enter, he walked through the screen doors as they closed behind him and looked upon the Northwest’s adjutant.

Although less powerful than the Quartermaster-General, the Adjutant-General, Yuxin Dae, interacted with General Kitara more frequently than Kang Shin did and thus the two had a closer working relationship with each other.

From what Sam heard of Dae, he had come from a wealthy merchant family who was close to the prime minister, the second-most powerful official in the empire loosely similar to the Hand of the King, and had just entered the nobility. But being the second son, Yuxin Dae opted to take the military examinations and worked his way up to become a cavalry brigade commander. Sam thought it was strange that someone from a family such as his would choose cavalry before remembering that only knights or houses of some considerable repute could afford horses. That’s when Sam understood that the army was a social establishment as much as it was an armed one, which would explain why many such as Lord Joon and Dae would start out as cavalrymen.

But then, Sam was confused as to how a man like Kang Shin was able to been if he had told the truth regarding his background. A question for another time, Sam thought.

“You’re not the usual courier from Quartermaster Shin,” Dae remarked in nihongo.

“No, Adjutant. I am not,” Sam replied. “I am Samwell Tarly—”

“Yes, yes, I know who you are. You’re Lord Joon’s white monkey,” Dae blurted out.

“I beg your pardon?” Sam knew instantly that was a very low insult.

“He found you and your friends stranded and you follow him and Quartermaster Shin around like his bitch,” Dae scoffed. “What shall we do with you?”

Sam laid the scrolls on his table and wanted to leave quickly. “These are the scrolls of this army’s expenses and the intelligence reports compiled by the quartermaster. The quartermaster sends his regards,” Sam dipped his head before turning to leave.

“I didn’t dismiss you, you white devil,” Dae stopped him. Standing up from behind his table, Dae came closer to Sam. He looked at him up and down. “It’s a wonder that the beasts in the world didn’t devour you. Good thing that you’re not a soldier, otherwise you would be the first to be killed. Your belly would make quite the target for enemy archers.”
Sam controlled his nervousness. “Is there a point you’re trying to make, Adjutant?”

But to his surprise, Dae smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Lord Tarly. I’m just trying to measure you and most men would have been quaked at what I just did. Have a seat, my lord.”

Sam sat down slowly on the cushion opposite of Yuxin, relieved that he wasn’t serious but still uneasy.

“I have that you have done some fine work with the Quartermaster, Lord Tarly,” Yuxin sat back down on the cushion. “He’s not an easy man to please and anyone who does so is someone to take note of.”

“I haven’t pleased him, Adjutant,” Sam answered. “But he hasn’t complained.”

“So I’ve heard. Now usually, someone who does excellent work for three moons is eligible for a promotion,” Yuxin stated, which caused an innocent smile to form on Sam’s face. “However, that only applies to those with officer commissions and therefore you are not included.” Sam’s smile dropped.

“Then why tell me this?”

“Because you have done fine work for this army so far and such work merits a reward, wouldn’t you say?”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t expect much rewards. General Kitara’s generosity is more than enough.”

“Come now, my lord,” Yuxin said. “That attitude is not a way for you to move up in the world. You might be of nobility, but you also have to show some initiative. Take what you can and no one should tell you differently.”

“There are some who might disagree with that,” Sam replied, thinking of his father’s response whenever he chose books to the sword.

“Then they are fools, for the world awaits no one,” Yuxin answered. You are the second person to call my father a fool.

“What reward are you thinking of?” Sam wanted to end the suspense.

“I’ve put in a word with the Captain Han, who was sent here from the capital to help acquaint our troops with the new black powder weapons. He needs an assistant who is good with numbers and is capable of dealing with changing conditions, and your name came up,” Yuxin explained.

Sam exhaled. “If I may be frank, that doesn’t seem like a promotion. I’m already doing similar duties with Quartermaster Shin and I fear that my duties with this Captain Han would interfere with my current duties.”

“It is a promotion, Lord Tarly. An assistant to an officer sent from the capital requires a military commission, which you shall be given when you take the position.”

Sam was confused. “A commission?”

“Yes,” Yuxin affirmed. “It’s only a temporary commission, mind you, but you would be treated as an officer.”
“Do you have permission from General Kitara to offer me this?”

“Yes, I do.” But Sam had learned something very important. As obstructive and vindictive as Kang Shin was, he never lied to him and was very brutally honest with Sam. For Yuxin, he was smiling and kind, but such a face was meant to cover a malicious intent and Sam knew that there was more to what Yuxin was offering than what he was revealing.

“And so, you wouldn’t mind if I were to return to Kushiro by dusk and ask the general if he gave you permission to offer me that?” Sam asked. As expected, the smile on Yuxin’s face disappeared. “And I’m guessing that Captain Han never told me he wanted an assistant?”

Yuxin sighed. “Looks like you are not thick. Well, my father said that appearances could be deceiving so I better remember that the next time.”

Sam cocked his head. “So what’s your real reason for offering me this?”

Yuxin licked his lips. “Quartermaster Shin is a commoner, as you might have heard.” Sam nodded. “And yet he has major responsibilities. One has to wonder how he does it.”

“I don’t see where I fit in this,” Sam said.

“I am getting to that. You’re a white devil and thus your position in this empire will never be secure. That is, unless you have a more permanent post,” Yuxin pointed out.

“And what is your point?” Sam wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“I require copies of the intelligence reports he receives. Not the ones he submits to the general, but the ones he deems as unnecessary. There is information worth looking over there and I would like to be the one to know about it. If you report to me and hand those copies over, I will talk with my father and he’ll have you sent to the capital, where you shall receive a post more fitting for someone of your talents. What do you say?” Yuxin offered.

Sam knew that whatever Yuxin was offering did not have good consequences, but he couldn’t afford to antagonize the adjutant. Mustering the calmest face he could, Sam breathed in and out before saying, “I will keep your offer in mind, adjutant. You’re asking me to make a major decision and I shall need some time to consider it.”

Yuxin bobbed his head, somewhat satisfied with his answer but also displeased that he didn’t accept it. “You do that, but careful. Don’t take too long to deliberate on it.”

As soon as Sam left the main pavilion and rode back to Kushiro on horseback, he let out a heaviness that he didn’t know was in him. Before coming to Yi-Ti, he was resigned to a fate at the Wall and to books. But now, he was dealing with underhanded maneuvering by officers and with affairs that he never thought he would have to deal with. The books he read never did explain on how he could cope with such a drastic change in circumstances.

Jon walked with Chanhee in the tall grasses outside of Kushiro, with Ghost following close behind. It was near dusk and almost time for evening meals, but found that the diminishing rays of the sun
shining on the grasses made for quite a sight. Especially when the winds blew, the rays made the grasses looked more like waves of the sea. Jon never had much experience with the sea prior to the start of his journey eastwards from Eastwatch, but he began to find some peace whenever he looked upon the ocean and the grasslands around Kushiro provided such a comfort.

“You brood more, Jon Snow?” Chanhee asked Jon in guanhua. Like Chanhee, Jon became better at speaking all three tongues of the empire and had Sam to thank since he understood the struggles. However, it was still a long way before he could have full conversations in them.

“Just appreciating the view here,” Jon replied. It was the truth, as it was during dusk was Jon able to have respite from his studies in the mornings after breaking his fast and from the rigorous physical trainings under Hoon Ti in the afternoons. Dusk and the hours after their evening meals before going to sleep were the only times that Jon could fully appreciate the beauty of this place. *Has the beauty around Winterfell, but it’s much warmer here,* Jon mused.

“Is that all?” Chanhee inquired.

Jon looked at the ground before looking back up. “There are a lot of things that I’ve grown to like in the past moons. It’s not an easy feeling to accept that the world is bigger than you thought, but considering what I’ve just learned, maybe that’s not a bad thing to understand that a whole world exists outside home.”

“You’ve never been outside Westeros before coming here?” Chanhee kept up the slow pace.

Jon was hesitant to keep up his pretense as a bastard, but it was necessary despite growing to like Chanhee’s company. “I’m a bastard, so there are not a lot of chances afforded to those like me. I’ve met people from all over Westeros, but I’ve never travelled myself. But in less than a year, I visited places that I’ve only read about in books. I drank wine in Braavos, heard singers in Pentos and Lys, talked with a sellsword in Tyrosh, and became familiar with the politics of Volantis. The books cannot match personal experience.”

“I do not know,” Chanhee replied. “I do not read.”

Jon nodded in understanding. Chanhee might have spoken guanhua sufficiently enough besides her native tongue, but she was from the steppes and tribes from that region such as the Goi didn’t have access to proper education.

“But tell me more about Westeros. What is it like over there?” Chanhee asked.

Jon smiled, excited to finally explain where he came from to someone who didn’t know. “It’s a large place, though. Where would you like to start?”

“Well, start with where you came from,” Chanhee answered.

Jon talked to Chanhee about Winterfell, about his time spent with Arya and training Bran with the bow before and after the incident where he fell, and his time in the training yard with Robb. As much as he thought of Theon as an ass and poking at his false bastard status, Jon had to admit that the bad stuff were just as memorable as the good.

“You must close with this Arya,” Chanhee remarked.

“She my sister,” Jon answered.

“Is a blessing when brothers and sisters are close. I never was to mine,” Chanhee admitted.
Jon glanced at her. “You no talk about it if you don’t want.”

“No, it fine,” Chanhee answered. “After all, I the one to put knife in his back. I nine.”

Jon was shocked at that revelation. Chanhee’s a kinslayer?

Chanhee laughed. “Your look on face. No, I didn’t kill him. Never much a brother anyway, but he good at stealing horses. Till one day, he stole horses from wrong man and got killed for it.”

“I’m sorry,” Jon offered.

Chanhee waved it off. “Do not be. He a lousy brother.” Then, Chanhee stopped walking. “How you have it?”

“Have what?”

“Your skin was burnt, but not much,” Chanhee pointed out. “How you have it?”

Jon knew that there was no way for him to explain it without giving away his Targaryen heritage. However, Chanhee revealed something personal to her and Jon felt that she deserved something from him.

“I come from the Starks and they have some magic in their blood. It’s possible that some of it was used to protect my hand,” Jon gave her a half-truth, like with Lord Joon.

Chanhee nodded. “But you said that the Starks come from ice. What about fire?”

Jon shrugged. “I don’t know the full extent of the magical properties in my blood.” That was somewhat truthful, since it was only recently that he became aware of his forefathers.

“Maybe with time, you will be able to discover more. I can help you,” Chanhee said.

Jon smiled. “I’d like that.”

From the balcony of Kushiro’s main keep, Joon Kitara watched the exchange between the supposed Stark bastard and the Chogo woman. Walking back inside, he picked up the red dragon egg that was among Jon’s possessions. Setting it down, he picked up the journal, which contained handwriting from the well-known Bloodraven. Looking through the pages, his eyes focused on a certain passage in the middle:

_Sixth Moon, two hundred and twelve years after Aegon’s Conquest,

The second Blackfyre Rebellion has been contained before it could do as much damage as the first one and the pretender, Daemon the second of his name, taken into custody. But unlike the first one, the second Daemon did not have the combat prowess of his father and namesake and had displayed poor planning in his attempted seizure of the throne.

And yet, throughout my interrogations of this pretender, I cannot ignore that this one has uncommon abilities. He claims to have the dreams our common ancestor Daenys “the Dreamer” had, in which he predicted that his brothers would die and that the dragon egg at Whitewalls would hatch. This Daemon is technically a dragon courtesy to Daena and Aegon the Fourth of His Name, so the dragon egg hatching might have referred to himself after the dye was washed from his silver hair. He also talked about how Ser Duncan would join the Kingsguard, which is a serious possibility given his abilities._
As a descendant of the dragons, to deny that this Daemon had the dreams would be to discount my own heritage. I might not have the dreams like Daemon claims to have or have the unburnt trait like some Targaryens were known to possess, but I can know when things can happen based on my own instincts. I also have the silver hair that only Valyrians would have and my abilities in combat manifested in a different way but I became like my ancestors before me with the bow, as was the case of Alysanne Targaryen.

A dragon cannot hope to be understood by the masses, but I have a duty to the realm and this Daemon must be dealt with. We cannot kill him, as Bittersteel would simply replace him with his younger brother Haegon. But him being blood doesn’t concern me very much, as I’m already considered a kinslayer for killing the pretenders in the First Rebellion. If my grave must be spat on so that the realm would be preserved, so be it.

Joon had heard tell of this Bloodraven, but it was another thing to get a glimpse into the mind of such a notable figure. From Joon’s experience, the memory of Bloodraven was distorted into a conniving sorcerer since people feared what they didn’t understand. His actions in Westeros would have been made him a revered figure in Yi-Ti, as the imperial court understood the importance of cunning and the necessity of resorting to what outsiders would view as “underhanded tactics.” In Yi-Ti, there was no such thing as underhandedness, as opponents had to dealt with by any means necessary. In another life, Bloodraven would have been my hero, Joon mused.

But going back to the matter of Jon, Joon knew that there was something off about him. Seeing his skin not that damaged from the fire increased his suspicions, and given his possession of Dark Sister, the dragon egg, and Bloodraven’s journal, he realized that Jon had a closer connection to the dragons than he admitted.

Joon also knew that Jon was lying or telling him half-truths when it came to his heritage. He couldn’t deny that Jon had the blood of the First Men in him from what he read about them, but Joon knew that given the recent revelation, it must not have made up all of the blood in Jon’s veins.

Joon talked with Hoon Ti regarding the matter. “I know he’s not telling the truth about who he is,” the blind captain of Kushiro’s guard stated.

“How do you know?”

“He reacted… peculiarly whenever I talked about the Targaryens, Jaehaerys, and more recently, Rhaegar Targaryen. My first thought was that he was curious, but curiosity doesn’t result in hitched breaths or deep conflicts.”

“How can you sense conflicts in a person?” Joon remained amazed at Hoon Ti’s perceptiveness despite his blindness.

“I’ve learned to sense things without my eyes and it’s also something that you cannot develop on your own. If I were to guess, Jon is… related to the Targaryens. Or at the least has Valyrian blood in him,” Hoon observed.

“Hmmm,” Joon nodded.

“What do you plan to do?” Hoon asked.

“I have to find out the truth, but he’s not going to respond if I ask him straight. No, I’ll have to use something else.”
“Tell Jon that I require his presence at my evening meditations tonight before evening meals,” Joon told Hoon.

“But I thought those meditations were for yourself only,” Hoon crossed his arms.

“It’s not just any meditation. Maybe some strong scents might give me the answers that I seek,” Joon explained.

“I see,” Hoon bobbed his head in understanding. “I hope he won’t react badly.”

“He won’t,” Joon answered with confidence.

After climbing down the stairs of the main keep, Joon walked to Kushiro’s shrine, the place of worship at the castle for Yi-Ti’s spirits. Walking up the long path of stone stairs, one hundred steps, he arrived at the shrine, with its cypress bark roof, and a large shrine gate that stands near this place. Joon lit an incense stick, placed it in front of the tablet that had his father’s name, the previous Lord of Kushiro, and bowed before it on his knees three times.

Joon then made his way inside the shrine’s sanctum, which was simple room with a wooden floor and a small Juniper tree. He then lit the incense again, this one being stronger than the previous one due to having a higher concentration, and he sat down while crisscrossing his legs, resting his hands on his knees, and closing his eyes.

Breathing in the incense aroma, Joon was taken aback to when his father told him that he would have to join the army.

“I don’t want to go,” Joon said to his father.

“But you must. There is no greater way to make a man out of you than serving the emperor as a soldier.”

“But who’s going to take care of the castle when you go to the capital?”

“Your mother will. Now, I’ve already arranged for Abbott Cao to help you study for the military examinations in the eastern mountains and you shall be there before this moon is out. You’re not the first soldier in our family and you certainly won’t be the last.”

“But I don’t know if—”

“I shall hear no more of this,” his father cut him off.

Joon might have hesitated to join the army as his father intended at the first time, but he discovered a passion for soldiery as he studied and finally became an officer. He was proud to wear a uniform and the last twenty years saw him rise to become a general while also being groomed to take his father’s place as Governor of the Northwest Province. All of that would have never happened had he resisted his father’s wishes and he thus learned something important: the most important and impactful decisions of life can come from a path one might not choose to walk on at first.

“My lord?” Joon heard Jon call out behind him.

“Ah, yes. Do come in,” Joon sat up and bid Jon to enter.

“What is this place?” Jon looked around.
“This temple was built by my family over a thousand years ago and I come here to release the worries in my mind while pondering on the important lessons of life,” Joon waved his hand throughout the temple.

“So are these the spirits that I’ve heard about?” Jon looked at the tree.

“Yes, but unlike your Faith of the Seven, there are no central founding figures. It is comparable to your Old Gods, but unlike the Old Gods, there are no absolutes to our way of worship. There is no absolute right and wrong, and nobody is perfect. What we believe are optimistic beliefs, as we see people as good, while evil spirits cause evil. Consequently, the purpose of most rituals is to keep away evil spirits by purification, prayers and offerings to our spirits, those that reside in nature,” Joon explained.

Jon nodded. “That sounds interesting.”

Joon smiled. “It is. Now come sit alongside me,” he gestured to the spot next to him.

Jon copied Joon’s sitting posture. “Usually you light incense before entering this place, but considering that this is your first time, I shall overlook it.”

“My apologies, my lord.”

“It’s excusable,” Joon closed his eyes. “Now, how this works is that you close your eyes, breath in and out until you are calm, and release your worldly inhibitions.”

“May I ask for what purpose?”

“The world sometimes clouds us from our selves rooted in the spiritual, the one that matters more than who we are to others. To reach a certain level of attainment, we must empty ourselves of the world’s limits and thinking and seek what is inside of us ourselves.”

“But why now?” Jon asked.

Joon looked to Jon. “Because I think that it’s time you become familiar with the other side of the empire’s customs and you have much on your mind everyday, so this might do you some good.”

Jon exhaled before closing his eyes and taking several breaths. Meanwhile, Joon peaked at Jon to see the effects of the incense entering his nostrils. Hopefully, this works.

Immediately, Jon’s breath became shaky and his hands trembled. He was struggling to keep upright as the effects of the incense became stronger than Joon anticipated. Maybe he’s not used to the higher concentration.

Suddenly, Jon’s eyes rolled back into his head while he fell backwards on the floor. As Joon rushed to his side, Jon felt his mind enter an empty space before it turned into what looked like a tent.

Jon felt himself enter this tent, but instantly felt heaviness inside of it. Looking around, he saw a large man lying on some furs, but his eyes were unseeing and no breaths escaped his lips. Jon blinked before he heard someone crying, turning to see a woman with her head on her knees and in pain. Looking back to the man, he noticed a pillow next to him.

Jon walked closer to the woman, noticing that she had silver hair but was largely disheveled. He wanted to say things to comfort her, as he could tell that the man who was dead meant something to her.
Unexpectedly, the woman stopped crying and lifted her head off of her knees. With tears still on her eyes, she looked up as if she could see that there was another person in the tent staring down at her.

Jon gulped, seeing her violet amethysts. Between that, her silver hair, and the man Jon now recognized as a Dothraki chief, he could only conclude that this was Daenerys Targaryen, his aunt. *At long last, I finally see you.*

Jon couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she still looked despite looking like a mess, but then again, Valyrians were inhumanly beautiful. But Jon’s first concern was how he might act right now, both because he could see his aunt and how he could help her in her emotional state.

“Who are you?” That surprised Jon, as Daenerys slowly stood up and looked at Jon straight in his grey eyes.

“Can you see me?” Jon asked with shock.

Daenerys nodded. “Now I ask again. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“Um,” Jon scratched his head, not knowing how to say his first words to his aunt Daenerys. “I am Jon. Jon Snow,” Jon kept to his assumed identity.

“How are you here, Jon Snow?” Daenerys walked around him while he kept his eyes on hers.

“It’s complicated,” Jon answered simply.

“Please don’t say that. My life has already been filled with enough complications already,” Daenerys wiped her eyes before rubbing her belly.

“I assume that is your Dothraki husband?” Jon pointed to the dead man.

Daenerys nodded, but looked ready to cry again. Jon wanted to wipe the tears from her eyes, but decided against it. “My sun and stars, Drogo. And the father of my child, the child that I will never see grow up.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “I am so sorry.”

“What’s it to you?” Daenerys bitterly spat.

Before Jon could answer, they both heard loud roars outside of the tent. Exchanging glances with each other, they went outside to find nothing. Looking upon, Jon collapsed to the ground when he saw four large shapes descending upon the earth. Blinking, Jon was stunned to look upon creatures long thought dead to the world: dragons.

There was not just one, but there were four of them. *Four dragons?* One was black and the largest, the other white as cream, one green, and one red. The last one caught Jon’s eye, as that red resembled the red on the dragon egg Aemon gifted to him.

Standing back up, Jon steeled himself when the dragons roared at him before the green and red dragons moved closer to him. Overcoming his initial fear, Jon began to appreciate… the beauty of these long-lost creatures. Taking several moments and several small paces towards them, he ran his hand slowly on both of their snouts. Jon smiled and laughed after seeing how they basked in his attention.

Turning around, Jon looked to see Daenerys confused. “In my previous vision, I only saw a black
dragon and then two others just like the white one and the green one. Those are the colors of my
dragon eggs, but I never saw a red one before now even though I don’t have a red egg.”

Jon didn’t know how to answer that. Daenerys took a step closer to Jon. “Who are you, really?”

Before Jon could answer, he felt the tent disappearing into the nothingness and the dragons with it.
Not wanting for his aunt to go without an answer, Jon managed to say, “I am the blood of the
dragon.”

Jon felt his eyes open and he was back inside the sanctum. Sitting back up, Jon saw Lord Joon
eying him with astonishment.

“What was that, about you having the blood of the dragon?” Joon asked, stunned.

Jon knew that there was no avoiding that question, now that Lord Joon had an important piece of
the puzzle. “Is that why you had me inhale that? To get answers from me?”

“I knew something was up when your hand wasn’t severely burnt,” Joon replied. “I believe you
have some explaining to do.”

Jon sighed, fighting the urge to curse himself for such carelessness. “Yes, I believe I do.”

Elsewhere, Daenerys woke from that vision he had and was stunned when that comely man with
raven hair and grey eyes said, “I am the blood of the dragon.”

Daenerys thought that her grief must’ve been talking, but considering what she had seen with the
maegi and the fact that she had seen visions of her dragons out of their eggs before, she wiped away
her tears and stood back up. For the first time since she had to kill her sun and stars and seeing the
deformed shape of her child, she felt hope run through her.

There is another. I’m not alone, Daenerys thought confidently.

Chapter End Notes

Didn’t expect that ending, didn't you? ;)

Joon deciding to take matters into his own hands and essentially cause Jon's reaction
was necessary and I hope I showed the effects of a trip induced with incense. And
now, we finally have Jon and Dany meeting, although Dany still doesn't know who
Jon is despite knowing that they're related. I hope that wasn't too sudden and too abrupt
and I hope I touched on the eastern spiritual traditions well.

And Sam is now dealing with his own problems. He better toughen up.

Next, we see Joon getting more answers from Jon and taking him on an actual trip.
Jon nervously held the cup out with both hands, as Joon moved to pour tea in it. He kept his eyes on Joon’s, who looked at him with such sharpness that they threatened to bore through his own. However, as was the custom in the empire, the younger should accept whenever an elder gave an invitation for tea.

What Jon did not expect was Joon continuing to pour even as the cup overflowed with hot tea. The precious water spilled onto the wooden floor, the low table, and the cushions, and any other person would have recoiled and their skin turning red. But Jon was not any other person because to his slight surprise, his skin did not turn red nor did it sting enough for him to pull away. *Is this my unburnt trait kicking in?*

Joon noticed this and stopped pouring before giving tea to Benjen and Sam setting down the cheongja teapot. After Joon sat down and drank from his cup, the three followed. In the empire, one never drank before the elder or if one was a guest, both of which applied.

Joon placed the cup on the table gently before eyeing Jon’s hands again. “So you have fire in your blood, don’t you, Lord Snow?”

Jon put the cup down. “That’s one way of putting it, my lord.”

Unexpectedly, Joon slammed his hand down, causing jolts from Jon, Benjen, and Sam as they moved back slightly. Jon had never been anxious of Lord Joon before this moment, as while he didn’t give any outward sign of anger, he had come to know when their host would become infuriated. And the intimidating thing about Lord Joon was that he never raised his voice.

“I fed you all, gave you shelter, paid you all sufficient stipends, and entrusted you with important tasks to stop you becoming idle, and this is how you repay me? By not telling me the truth and trying to avoid answering my questions?” Joon’s jaws clenched.

“And we are grateful for—” Benjen began, before Joon narrowed his eyes at him and thus prompting his silence.

“If you wanted to keep a secret from me, Lord Snow or whatever your name is, you should’ve been more discreet. I knew you were hiding something from the moment I saw you and what just happened tonight confirmed my suspicions, although I must admit that I did not expect you to have the blood of the dragon,” Joon was calmer that time.

Jon was still cursing himself for revealing his true heritage, but he wanted to make sure that his aunt knew that there was another. *Hopefully, she was able to get my last words.*
“So, your name,” Joon was not going to waste time. “What is your real name, Jon Snow or whatever your name is?”

Jon looked at Benjen for guidance, who had gulped at their secret being revealed.

“Do not look at your uncle,” Joon ordered. “I am asking the question. Who are you?”

Jon inhaled and exhaled, preparing himself for what he was going to say next. “Lord Joon, my name was kept a secret from you because we didn’t know if we could trust you. You have provided us with food and shelter, yes, but we don’t know if you have connections to anyone back in Westeros. Your knowledge of our lands and your ability to speak the common tongue well only increased our concerns.”

“Because you’re a Targaryen?” From Jon’s skin not burning in the fire and from the hot tea and Jon saying he’s the blood of the dragon, it didn’t take long for Joon to put it together.

Jon bit his lips before nodding. “Yes, I’m a Targaryen.”

Joon sighed. “I can understand your concerns. There are only two Targaryens that managed to escape during what you people call Robert’s Rebellion and the madness of the last Targaryen king making the whole of House Targaryen very undesirable in current political situations. But you should know that you are far away from any place where your name would have any meaning. Besides, it’s been centuries since the Golden Empire had any dealings with dragonlords, so the memory of your kind is faded from ours.”

Jon should’ve not been surprised at Joon’s bluntness, but to hear him describe his family so coldly was… another thing entirely. People back home always talked about the Targaryens with fear, reverence, disgust, or a combination of the three, but all treated the Targaryens with importance. Being here taught Jon that he had to go thousands of miles before no one gave a damn about where he came from.

“But I am still confused. While I have no doubts about you being a Targaryen, who sired you? It can’t have been Aerys, since I’ve heard that his wife Rhaella died giving birth to Daenerys Targaryen just shortly after the Rebellion. Also, his son Viserys was too young to have children while Rhaegar was already married by the time the Rebellion took place. Unless…” Joon thought aloud before giving Jon a more piercing look.

Jon sighed, deciding that it was better to not delay further. “Yes, I am the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.”

“A bastard then,” Joon concluded.

“No,” Benjen shook his head. “He’s not a bastard, my lord. He’s—”

“Quiet, Lord Stark, I am speaking with your nephew, if what he says is true,” Joon reprimanded. “Continue.”

“I am no bastard, Lord Joon,” Jon began as he explained his heritage, the reasons that could’ve prevented the Rebellion, and the fact that Rhaegar’s first wife Elia knew all along.

Joon found himself pouring another cup of tea as Jon finished illuminating the Lord of Kushiro. Finishing his cup, he looked at the three with less indifference and less anger, but was in deep thought in regards to the new knowledge.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Joon finally asked after what seemed like a long pause.
“My lord?” Jon questioned.

“I brought in three guests under my roof, one of whom is in fact the scion of a dethroned dynasty, but I don’t know what to do with this information. As I said, your name and your heritage have no weight here. I can’t say anything about this to anyone, not because of the danger you’ll be placed in, but because no one cares about you on this side of the world. You’re just another descendant of a line bereft of leadership.”

Jon had to admit that Joon was much more cutting in saying the truth than Ned Stark ever was. All of what he said made sense, making Jon think on how important the Targaryens really were in the larger order of things.

“And you say that you had to leave Westeros because of your Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch found something north of your Wall that concerned him? What is it?” Joon pressed.

“But if we told you, you’d never believe us,” Jon responded.

“I saw you have your skin remain unaffected by heat and you talking via incense. Tell me, what more should I need to see in order to become convinced of the fantastical elements of the world?” Joon countered.

“I’m afraid I will defer to my uncle Benjen for that. He has more experience with what’s going on than I do,” Jon gestured to Benjen.

Joon looked at him expectedly. “Well?”

Benjen took a moment to gather his thoughts before he told him of the Long Night, the wights that had attacked Lord Mormont, and the reason behind the wildlings advancing on the Wall. Jon knew that the truth was out now and that they now had to face the consequences of their actions.

Joon remained indifferent, but concern briefly flashed across his face. “If I hadn’t seen what Jon had or what he did, I would’ve thought you all insane. But experience also told me that you shouldn’t discount experiences because of own prejudices. In the army, we have a basic principle in regards to gathering intelligence: ask enough questions and a man who is lying will eventually change his story. But the man who tells the truth cannot change his, however unlikely his story sounds.”

“So you believe us, my lord?” Sam asked hopefully.

“I’m only saying that what you all have revealed to me is a strong possibility. Even with your possession of Dark Sister and the dragon egg, I still don’t have enough proof of your heritage. Even if I did, it’ll be useless to me and at the same time, such facts cannot be hidden forever,” Joon outlined.

“So what are you suggesting, Lord Joon?” Jon inquired.

Joon sighed. “It would’ve been better if you had your own answers, but then again, you’re young and you have little experience regarding the important affairs of life. The fact that you come from royalty only compounds to the difficulty of my situation, since you have dragonblood in your veins but you still don’t know how to fully come to terms with it.”

“I beg your pardon?” Jon’s eyebrow rose.

“You lived as a bastard throughout your whole life and it was recently that you discovered who you really were. But that knowledge is nothing if you don’t have what it takes to be a true dragon and
royal. You’re a boy and you don’t know how to command armies, maneuver through court plots, and be comfortable with yourself. You reveal this to anyone without having all of those skills, and it’s a quick trip to the grave. You’ll be but a breath exhaled among many.”

Jon couldn’t deny what he said, so he decided to take a chance. “Then I ask you, Lord Joon, not as Jon but as Daeron Targaryen, to teach me in those areas. Help me become the ruler that I must be so that I can return home prepared to retake my family’s throne and face the threat that’s coming.”

“And what can I possibly teach you?” Joon was in disbelief. “Yes, I am Governor of the Northwest Province and I know how to command an army, but what you’re asking goes beyond what I can give. You will have more luck getting what you seek in the capital than here.”

“If I may, Lord Joon,” Benjen cut in. Joon gave his assent. “You’re right to be worried about this new knowledge you have and you’re right in everything you said. I don’t know how well you profess your beliefs in whichever gods you follow, but I know that everything has a purpose. We were meant to be shipwrecked in Yi-Ti. We were meant to be found by you. We were meant to live under your roof for these past moons. The reason I know this to be true was because we met you, my lord. Any other man, and we would have struggled much more. The Old Gods wanted us to be here at this moment, so that must be considered.”

Jon became even more grateful for his uncle coming with him, as he was wiser than Jon ever was at this point and he knew that he would be lost in this land without him. He was confirmed in his gratefulness to his uncle with Joon listening very intently to Benjen’s words and offering him another cup of tea, which Benjen accepted.

“I do believe that there is a higher purpose at work, Lord Stark. But regarding my decision on whether or not to help your nephew, that’s a decision that I cannot make on my own,” Joon said.

“What do you mean?” Benjen put the teacup down.

“I’ll let my family be aware of this new information when the time is right, but before that, I must seek guidance from someone who would know what to do.”

“And who would that be, my lord?” Sam inquired.

Joon thought about it some more before standing up from his cushions. “Do you prefer Jon or Daeron?” he addressed Jon.

“I respond to both, Lord Joon,” Jon answered.

“No, you choose one or the other. Make a decision and live with it, as that’s the one of the first things you must be do if you want to become a ruler,” Joon stressed.

Jon had lived with his name for all of his life up till that point. His was a name that Ned Stark gave to protect, and one that he used to protect him in this new land. However, now that his secret was out, he had to make a choice to embrace his heritage. Swallowing, he looked up at Joon.

“If you must choose, Lord Joon, then you can call me… Daeron.”

Benjen and Sam looked at him with wide eyes, surprised at how quickly Jon decided to accept his Targaryen origins. But he didn’t want things to change between them.

“But ‘Jon’ will be reserved only to my friends and family. That is a name that they became close with and that name will be how I choose who I become close with in the future,” Jon declared.
Joon nodded with satisfaction. “As you wish… Daeron. Pack some essentials. We’re going on an excursion.”

Jon became surprised. “Where are we going?”

“I know someone who might help with our debacle in regards to your heritage. At the edge of the eastern provinces lies a mountain range called the Mountains of the Morn. There’s a shrine there where I did my studies for my examinations before I joined the army and the abbot, Cao, told me to go there whenever I needed help,” Joon explained.

“All right,” Jon nodded. “But what about my trainings?”

“This takes precedent over your trainings, wouldn’t you say?” Joon asked pointedly. “My son Seong will take over running Kushiro in my absence while your friend and your uncle will continue their present duties. We leave in the morning,” and with that, Joon left the room.

Jon let out a breath he didn’t know he had. He expected Lord Joon to react more badly to the revelation, but he took it rather well. It made Jon all the more thankful that they had come across Joon Kitara during their time in Yi-Ti.

“I just hope that nothing will bad will happen to you during your excursion with Lord Joon,” Sam said. “He’s really turning out well for us, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Aye,” Benjen exhaled in relief. “He spoke nothing but the truth, which tells much about his character. But I’ve heard tell of who resides in the Mountains of the Morn. They say that men with leather wings are able to fly there along with corpses so pale that the life has been sucked out of them. It’s a part of the world that no man of Westeros has seen, ever.”

“Well, better be prepared for my entrance into the eagle’s nest then,” Jon quipped.

Benjen clasped Jon’s shoulders. “Who knows what might come, but I hope you and Lord Joon get the answers you’re searching for. Let’s help you pack.”

Jon said his goodbyes to Benjen and Sam, sad to be separated from them but knowing for sure that they would be reunited soon. Along with his swords and silk shirts, Joon took five other men with him, men who could ride fast along the roads of the empire. They were all equipped with a dao, daggers, and axes, but they were all urged not to wear uniforms, as that would draw the wrong type of attention during their journey. Instead, they, like Joon and Jon, carried paper certificates signed with his own personal seal that verified their identities if asked.

But before Jon rode out of the gate, Chanhee walked up to him.

“I hear from servants that you go east,” Chanhee said in guanhua.

“Yes, I am,” Jon nodded.

Chanhee stared into his grey eyes. “It going to be empty around here, without you.”

Jon smiled. “Do not worry. I be back soon.”

“Good. You better,” Chanhee smiled back. “We should finish conversation on family when you return.”

“Yes, we shall,” promised Jon. But to his surprise, Chanhee pulled him into a big, tight hug. After a moment of getting over his astonishment, Jon wrapped his arms around her to return the embrace.
Now that she had time to properly clean herself and become accustomed to the etiquettes around Kushiro, she smelt like the blossoms in Kushiro’s courtyard and her hair felt like the smoothest silk. Jon also noticed how her white skin shined without the dirt he had seen the first time he saw her and how her eyes and smile brought warmth to his heart.

“Lord Snow,” Joon kept up the pretense in front of his men. “Enough with the hugging. We must go.”

Jon pulled away from the hug, but both he and Chanhee remained smiling while Jon mounted his horse.

“You ready for a journey, boy?” Ghost grinned, happy to leave the confines of the castle to finally run free in the open space. “Good, let’s go.”

Riding hard through the gate, Jon, Joon, the five men, and the white direwolf traveled on the stone roads of the empire eastward towards the Mountains of the Morn.

As they traveled further, Jon noted how similar the northern provinces of the Golden Empire were to the North. Both were rather flat, had grasslands, and were largely ignored by the machinations further south, especially around Yin. However, unlike the North, the northern provinces were much warmer, more fertile, and had a system of roads where one could expect to be from one side to the other in reasonable time, most likely around two or three weeks. The only road of any note back in the North was the kingsroad, but traveling throughout the North was a taxing process. It made Jon all the more impressed with how developed Yi-Ti was in compared to all of Westeros. How did these people become so advanced while Westeros remains stagnant?

The riding party stopped by various taverns along the way, which Jon noted were similar to stops made by travelers or merchants passing through. He wondered how the roads remained safe for all to move before he saw the same guard posts that lined the road between Kushiro and Joon’s headquarters. Security on the road was treated as a serious matter, as safety led to prosperity since people could count on their roads being safe and protected.

The party was treated to very simple meals at each tavern: a bowl of rice, steamed buns with meat fillings, and warm soup of various kinds. Jon was confused as to why a lord like Joon would even contemplate going near such a place where people of various origins mingled with each other.

“I could go live at another lord’s residence, but I would have to let them know ahead of time of my arrival. But more than that, if a lord is treated as a guest in another lord’s house, then there would be other lordly matters that would be discussed and then feasts and so on. All of them take time, which is something that I don’t want to spend on unnecessary pleasantries,” Joon clarified.

“I understand, my lord.” Jon and Joon were speaking in the common tongue, which no one in the taverns they went could even understand.

“But first, I will take care of some business when we come near the Five Forts,” Joon added. “I know the Guardian well.”

Jon had heard tell of the Five Forts in Kushiro. The forts supposedly had walls that were more slabs of fused black stone almost a thousand feet high. Each fort could house ten thousand men and currently guard the Golden Empire from raiders out of the Grey Waste. While each fort had a governor in command, all five governors answered to the Guardian, appointed by the emperor himself and responsible for ensuring that the Five Forts protected the empire well. Appointments to the Five Forts were considered a great honor and the position of Guardian held a considerable
amount of prestige among imperial military circles. *Forts that can hold ten thousand men... I have to see this.*

“I look forward to seeing the Five Forts with you, Lord Joon,” Jon eagerly stated.

“Good. It is quite a sight,” Joon smiled.

As Jon went outside of the tavern after his meal was done, he went to pet Ghost’s fur while avoiding the strange looks on the others who passed by. He had already gone further than anyone in his family, both Stark and Targaryen, had gone and not even an explorer as famed Corlys Velaryon could boast about seeing the Five Forts. *All of this because I found out who I was.*

But as Joon pointed out, Jon still had a long way to go before he could fully embrace his Targaryen heritage. *Hopefully, the shrine in the Mountains of the Morn has the answers Lord Joon, and maybe myself, needs.* He was curious as to why Lord Joon brought the red dragon egg and Dark Sister with him, but decided to trust Lord Joon’s reasoning.

Eventually, they came to a tavern nearby a fork in the road, but Jon looked in the distance and saw towering mountains not far off. The mountains cast a cooling shadow over the rolling pastures and fearsome mountainside and if one looked further up, one could see the snow and ice upon their summits, both of them as white as the ones he saw at the Wall. It was easily the tallest mountain range he had seen.

“What are those mountains, my lord?” Jon asked Joon.

“Those, Lord Snow, are the Mountains of the Morn,” Joon answered.

*So that’s where the shrine is. Very imposing indeed,* Jon thought in wonder.

“We must part ways for now, so wait there at that tavern. I’ll be back before the day has ended,” Joon pointed to the tavern next to the fork.

“Where are you going?” Jon asked.

“This road leads to the headquarters of the Five Forts. I can’t take you with me, or it’ll cause too much suspicion. Don’t worry, I’ll only be discussing inconsequential matters with the Guardian,” Joon explained.

“My lord, I… don’t know if I can handle myself well in a tavern without your help,” Jon tried to reason with him.

“So learn. I’ll leave Hengeng, Pansoo, and Taelong with you while I take Binlu with me. Behave yourselves,” Joon warned them all before galloping down the divergent road.

Jon looked at the three nervously before leading them to the tavern. Walking inside, he was surprised to find it empty before an elderly Yi-Tish woman gestured them to a table. While his hold of guanhua improved, he still had to nod and just follow the hand gestures.

Jon ordered the same bowl of rice, steamed buns, and warm soup that they had for the past few weeks. He had also became more used to the hashi and dug into his food as soon as it arrived at their table. He noticed that the food was different in this region, as the rice was less sticky but the meat fillings felt richer in taste. *That’s strange,* Jon noted, as they were in a relatively desolate area of the empire.

But Jon noticed the three members of Kushiro’s guards staring at him as they ate their food. They
were thin, clean shaven, and had their hair tied up in a bun, but all eyed him with suspicion. And Jon knew from their disposition that they were veteran soldiers, men who knew how to wield weapons and how to kill a man in various ways.

Jon set down his hashi. “What you looking at?” Jon asked in guanhua.

“Lord Joon is taking us on this excursion because he needs protection when we do enter the Mountains, but why does he need you?” one of them asked.

“I am sorry. What your name again?” Jon asked.

“Hengeng.”

“I told him something, something that he says that he requires guidance on, and he said that I must accompany him,” Jon answered.

“No need for us to know, Hengeng. It’s Lord Joon’s business and we have no right knowing,” the other man told him.

“What is your name again?”

“Pansoo,” the other man replied.

“Pansoo, how long you be in Lord Joon’s service?” Now that they had some time, Jon wanted to know more about his host’s retainers.

“Approaching ten years, followed by twenty in the infantry,” Pansoo said.

“I was with Lord Joon for twelve years, followed by twenty in the cavalry,” Hengeng added.

“For me, eleven years followed by twenty in the flying columns,” the one who Jon presumed was Taelong stated.

Jon looked at all three retainers, who were in Lord Joon’s service for a long time. However, he also noticed that they all served twenty years in the army.

“What’s special about twenty years?

“May I ask what is significance behind you all serving twenty years in the army?” Jon inquired.

“Twenty years is the amount of time you must serve before you receive the maximum reward from the empire,” Hengeng continued to eat. “While people can volunteer for the army, it’s a hard existence for those who weren’t born with land or titles. At least with the army, you get steady wages and temporary tax exemptions. But if you extended your enlistment past eight years and serve for twenty, the empire will give us some land, a final pay of a thousand taels, and a certificate saying that we completed our twenty years with honor. A lot of doors could open with that certificate.”

Jon took this in. Lords back in Westeros called their banners and whoever was not a knight or a highborn were expected to answer and return to their farms when the fighting has concluded. But Yi-Ti had a different set of rules and Jon remained struck at how… forward this land was. At the same time, he remained wary, as the problems that afflicted his home would no doubt affect this land also. How is it that people everywhere are becoming more similar the more I see them?

“If you have that certificate, why did you choose to serve Lord Joon?” Jon asked.

“We served under the general during our final five years in the army,” Taelong said. “And we
served under his father before that. Both treated their soldiers with decency and respect, which is unfortunately not the case with the other governors and captain-generals in the empire. We know because we were loaned to the Governor of the Southwest Province during a riot in Asabhad. Biggest cunt we’ve seen. That fucker didn’t know how to lead troops and it was only because of our commanding officer there were we able to salvage that shit.”

Jon smirked, amused at the soldiers cursing a senior official.

“It doesn’t get better than Lord Joon,” Pansoo added. “Sure, we might find more opportunities in the south, maybe make a fortune in the capital given our qualifications. But we’d rather stick with a man who actually gives a damn to the people who serve him. And that’s why we’re here.”

Jon knew that Joon was a man who could be trusted with governance, but here he saw evidence of his ability to instill loyalty in the men who followed him. Ned Stark was like that, but no matter how much it pained Jon to realize it, his abilities were limited given that he was not good at sensing threats and maneuvering through people. Joon was a grizzled warrior and leader, but if pushed, he could become a nightmare. Jon almost got a taste of it when he revealed his true identity to the Lord of Kushiro. Need to be more careful in how I tell my lies to him, or better, try not to if necessary.

“Tell us about yourself, Lord Snow,” Pansoo decided to ask that.

“Me?” Jon was surprised.

“A comely young man like you, currently training with Captain Ti and has a large white wolf and a Chogo lady to call his own. There has to be a good story behind that,” Pansoo noted.

Jon slightly flushed. “I don’t know if you can call Chanhee my lady.”

“Come now,” Taelong chuckled. “A pretty woman like her? Unless you’re dead between the legs, a handsome boy like yourself would be foolish as to not make a move. I would.”

Jon nervous laughed, uncomfortable at both notions. “I don’t know where to start,” he decided to indulge them to pass the time.

“Wherever you feel like, Lord Snow,” Hengeng put his hashi and leaned forward on the table to listen.

Jon was careful to leave out his Targaryen heritage, as it was still a secret except to Joon, but he was sure that his stories in the Free Cities would be enough. Several times, the men interrupted to ask questions, such as the ale in Braavos and especially the women in Lys.

“I never saw the appeal in that,” Pansoo shook his head. “Who’d want to bed an old lady?”

Jon blinked. “Old?”

“I get that people are attracted to so-called Valyrian beauties, but no normal person would want to have white hair, unless they’ve aged considerably and thus taking away the appeal,” Pansoo outlined.

This surprised Jon, as these were the first men who weren’t attracted to Valyrian beauty. Maybe because they haven’t actually met any. That could change if they did.

“So, Lord Snow. You have a woman back home?” Taelong asked.
Jon wasn’t as bothered by that question as before, but whether it was because he answered so many times or because he knew the truth about himself was still unknown to him. “No, I don’t. No one wants to be with a bastard, unless you’re a whore.”

“You see, I never understood that,” Hengeng said. “Just because your parents weren’t married doesn’t give people the right to give that child a hellish treatment. If anything, it’s the father’s fault because he couldn’t keep it to himself.”

“Thank you for being so enlightened,” Jon said with sarcasm. *If only I heard that earlier…*

“No, I’m serious. I knew a child like that back in my village. No one wanted him, so the local monastery took him in. They fed him, educated him, and did other things that his real parents should’ve done for him. However, he didn’t want to be a monk and had asked the head abbot for help in taking the military examinations. Naturally, the head abbot was unsure of his ability to teach the boy,” Hengeng explained.

“Naturally,” Jon became very interested in his story.

“However, the abbot finally relented. When the time came for him to take the examinations, he passed with first ranks and became an infantry officer. He rose up through the ranks and became a lieutenant-general of the infantry after reaching the age of one and thirty. The last time I heard of him, he was in the capital as a vice minister of war.”

Jon knew that position was a huge progression from being a bastard. “And may I ask why you’re telling me this?”

“People ignore bastards at their own peril,” Hengeng shrugged. “I should know because I used to be one of those who ignored them. Now, my village prides itself in producing a general when decades before, they tormented him. Shows just what happens when you underestimate people, especially bastards.”

To hear Hengeng’s words on bastardy was very… refreshing for Jon. If Jon had managed what that child accomplished, Catelyn Tully would say, “See, that’s what a bastard does. He seeks to supplant our family.” He scoffed at that memory, knowing that his bastard stain was false but it still gave him some satisfaction knowing that at least one person knew better than to make assumptions.

“Thank you, Hengeng,” Jon smiled.

“You’re welcome, Lord Snow,” Hengeng said before continuing his meal.

Jon and the three men continued to eat in silence before the old lady came to their table and asked if they wanted some strong spirits. Deciding to be a host, Jon asked for two bottles and paid both for that and their meals. The men thanked Jon and the old lady collected their dishes before bringing two bottles of arakju, which Jon noticed had no smell.

Remembering what he learned from the morning tutor, Jon poured each man a cup full of arakju since he was providing. After he poured himself a cup, Jon raised it. “Gunbae,” Jon nodded.

“Gunbae,” the men cheered before drinking. Jon shook his head, noting how strong the taste was.

“More, please,” Pansoo held out his cup, as did Hengeng and Taelong. Jon happily obliged and they enjoyed several more rounds.

The hours passed by as the drink took hold and the men became more loose, telling bawdy jokes to
each other and exchanging stories from a time long past. As for Jon, he was careful in not getting too drunk since that could lead to loose lips, which was why he drank very slowly. *This is some strong stuff. I might drink this more often.*

This arakju, made from rice and distilled with strong heat, was certainly stronger than all of the ale and wine Jon had drunk. It was largely odorless and clear, but when inside one’s mouth, it gave a burn that increased the heat in the body and it had to be drunk in small amounts since enough of it would cause a numbing sensation. It had no obvious taste, but it didn’t need to.

Seeing that Lord Joon had still not returned from the Five Forts and knowing that they would have to spend the night there, Jon paid for all of their rooms and helped each man to his. It was hard to drag drunken man up the stairs and put them in the sheets, but this was his doing as he paid for the arakju. *Maybe I shouldn’t pay for their drinks the next time around.*

As Jon was about to go to his room and wash up, he felt someone tapping his shoulder. Turning around, he jolted at the sight of Lord Joon behind him. “You surprised me, my lord.”

“What are the men?”

“I tucked them in their rooms. You were still gone by them,” Jon explained.

Joon sniffed him. “Were you drinking?”

Jon nodded. “The old lady asked if we wanted some drinks and I paid for them.”

Joon looked astounded. “As in… you engaged in conversation with the men?”

“Yes. We got to talking and I was able to discover some interesting things about them, mainly that they served under your father and then you, which is why they are in your personal service.”

“Did you tell them about yourself?”

“Only what I haven’t told you prior to your discovery a few weeks ago.”

Joon sighed before nodding approvingly. “So you’re learning now.”

“My lord?” Jon expected a scolding or another long conversation on how to be more prudent in his words.

“As it is the case all over the world, the common way to develop companionship is over a cup. You did exactly that and the men have a better opinion of you. So, you did good,” Joon gave Jon a small smile.

“Thank you, my lord,” Jon dipped his head in appreciation to Joon’s praise.

“You still have a long way to go, but it’s a good start. Now, get some rest. We’ll be at the shrine tomorrow.”

“Yes, my lord.”

But instead of going to his room, Jon went outside and sat next to Ghost, who was always eager for his companion’s attention. Looking up at the clear night sky and the many stars that lined it, Jon felt that something was going right for him in this land. Joon’s praise seemed to confirm it.

*In another life, I would’ve spent the rest of my life here.*
With their horses moving along the winding dirt paths deep in the Mountains of the Morn, they were moving at a slow and steady pace. Jon also saw that Joon and the men had the hands read to draw their swords if necessary. Looking around at the mountainside and seeing many boulders on it, he realized that they were in a risky area and Jon also was on alert.

Jon had read that the Vale of Arryn had imposing mountains, but looking up at their impressive heights, he knew for sure that the Vale had nothing on the Mountains of the Morn. Joon explained that many of the empire’s rivers originated from these mountains and only the hardiest people could scratch a living in this place. Seeing how massive these mountains were and how tiny Jon and others were in comparison, it really hit home for Jon that people were quite small in the larger scheme of things. *They said that dragons neither answered to gods or men, but is that really true given what I had just seen?*

It had also become quite cold as they moved further up the mountains, prompting Joon and the others to wear thick fur cloaks. Jon had to appreciate more irony, as he was in the cold and dressed like a northerner again. *But I’m not in the north, so I have to stay alert.*

After what seemed like hours, Joon smiled. “There it is. The monastery where I studied for my examinations.”

Jon looked over and saw a truly impressive sight. From what he could see, this monastery consisted of four main temples and living quarters shelters formed by adapting to the rock ledges, the caves that were unseen, and the rocky terrain. Out of the eight caves Jon could make out, four seemed comparatively easy to access. All the buildings looked interconnected through steps and stairways carved into the rock. There were a few rickety wooden bridges along the paths and stairways also to cross over. Each building had a balcony, which provides lovely views of the scenic views of the mountainside.

“Is that where you studied, my lord?” Jon asked with wonder.

“Yes, I just hope Abbot Cao is still alive. Been decades since I’ve last seen him.”

“What is that place called?”

“That… they call Dragon’s Cradle.”

Jon was struck by that name. Now he knew for certain that coming here was no accident. It was if the whole world was now impressing upon his true heritage. *I wonder what I’ll find here.*

Walking through the caverns and up more slopes, the riding party soon found themselves in the monastery’s courtyard. Jon found the place much bigger than it looked from the outside and like in headquarters, each man was focused on the task at hand whether it be tending to flowers or watering and not paying their guests any mind.

Dismounting, the group tied their horses and waited.

“Ah, Joon Kitara!” Jon heard someone exclaim in goryeomal. Looking up the stairs that led to one of the higher buildings, Jon saw an elderly man dressed in overflowing white robes and his head shaven like Lord Joon’s. But behind his white beard and his wrinkles, Jon saw that this man was wise, wiser than most men he met so far.

“Abbot Cao,” Joon Kitara stepped forward and bowed in respect. “It’s been too long, teacher.”

“I’m glad to see you and that my teachings have allowed you to rise very far in the empire,” Abbot Cao greeted warmly before turning to Jon. “And who is this?”
“Teacher, if you don’t mind, I would like to discuss this behind closed doors. He’s the reason why I’m here,” Joon said.

“Of course,” Abbot Cao nodded. “I’ll see that your men are taken care of. Let us have some tea, old student.”

“Very good, teacher,” Joon smiled while gesturing Jon to follow them up the stairs.

Walking through more hallways with open access to the outside and a bridge, which Jon was careful to walk over, he noticed a woman standing outside on top of a stone path, which took the shape of a bear. Jon was about to call out to her to try to get her back inside, but he noticed that the woman was in… a trance of some sort. Looking further, he saw the woman was in front of a snake. A snake? Jon saw that the woman was not in any danger, but she was performing various stances and movements with such grace even though she was just a few inches from falling to her death. She looked… calm and she was staring at the snake with such focus since her eyes were widened.

And then, the most expected thing happened. When she moved with her left hand slightly outstretched and palm facing the sky, the snake flinched. When she moved her hand from left to right, the snake moved along. It was as if the snake had been snatched by the woman and was now being made to follow her movements. It was unlike anything Jon had seen before. How is this possible?

“Jon, let’s go,” Joon called out and Jon caught up with them. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Lord Joon,” Jon responded, the sight still in his mind.

“That’s what happens when you allow the world to leave your mind and focus on serenity. It’s an occurrence that can only come about with much care,” Joon explained.

Maybe if we have time, I can ask the woman how she did that exactly.

Coming to the abbot’s personal quarters, Joon and Jon accepted tea. This tea was stronger than the one in Kushiro, but the scents and taste were at the same time relaxing.

“It’s jasmine tea,” the abbot explained to Jon in goryeomal. “I hope it’s to your liking.”

“Yes, it is. Thank you, abbot,” Jon set the cup down.

“Now, Joon. What is it you want to talk to me about that you cannot say outside?”

Joon turned to Jon. “Go on. Tell him.”

Jon told the abbot, with some hesitation, about his true origins and how he ended up in Yi-Ti. The abbot listened intently and while Jon explained, Joon pulled out the red dragon egg and Dark Sister. But what Jon felt after telling his story a second time was more… certainty. He was less insecure about telling about his origins and as he spoke further, the anxiety slowly disappeared. Maybe I should talk about my origins more, Jon silently quipped.

“And you don’t know what to do with his new knowledge?” the abbot addressed Joon.

“No. As I said, I don’t know what to do with this, considering that the Targaryens don’t matter in this part of the world,” Joon pointed out.

The abbot sighed. “Dragons have long become a faded memory in the empire, but those who know better understand the power that they had and that the magic in the world is still around. People
merely forgot where to look for it."

“What should I do, teacher?”

The abbot picked up the red dragon egg and examined it. “There is one way we can use that can prove young Daeron’s story and thus his connection to the dragons. He must enter the cave.”

Joon gulped. “You mean… the cave?”

“Yes. Once we have proof that he indeed does have the blood of the dragon, then we can plot our next move from there.”

“Would that be a good idea, teacher?”

“If his blood speaks true, then it shouldn’t difficult for him to reveal himself.”


The abbot set the dragon egg down. “There’s a cave further up the mountain and covered in trees. It is said that one of the gods came down to the earth and assumed the form of a dragon to watch over these mountains. That’s why this place is called Dragon’s Cradle.”

Jon was stunned. “A… dragon?”

“Not in the traditional sense, mind you,” the abbot said. “Here, the dragons are manifestations of the gods themselves, not fire-breathing beasts. But your blood, if you have it, should be enough to initiate contact.”

“Because I have dragon blood?”

“Exactly.”

Jon ran his hand through his raven hair. “I don’t know about this.”

“It’s the only way to get proof,” the abbot answered before standing up. “Follow me.”

Jon and Joon followed the abbot out of his quarters, back into the larger monastery, and walked upon two longer bridges before they came upon an imposing set of stone stairs. Jon’s legs burned from how steep they were while Ghost had an easier time, but as he moved up, he noticed the trees gave off a different feeling from how they looked and the wood seemed alive. *What is this?*

Jon then noticed a tiny white figure standing near a tree trunk, with a large head, mismatched eyes, and a baby-like body. Startled, Jon jerked back, as did Ghost.

“Ah, you see them,” the abbot noted.

“What is that?” Jon looked to the abbot.

“That is called a kodama, a spirit that lives among the trees. If you see a kodama in forests, it means that the forest is healthy and thus preserving the balance in nature,” the abbot explained.

*Kodama…* Jon kept staring at the white tree spirit before looking around and noticing more. Although struck by how many there were, it was still an unusual sight for him and he followed the two up the stairs quickly.

They finally arrived at a cave opening with trees on both sides. The abbot and Joon walked up to
the entrance before stopping. “I’m afraid… we cannot accompany you, Daeron Targaryen.”

Jon looked at Joon and the abbot with confusion. “Why?”

“In there, you must seek for yourself,” the abbot answered cryptically before Joon handed Jon the red dragon egg and Dark Sister.

“Hope these two serve you well in there,” Joon spoke to him. “We’ll be waiting. And I’ll keep an eye on Ghost while you’re gone. He can’t come with you there.”

Jon dipped his head in respect to Joon and the abbot. “I shall return.”

“I know you will,” the abbot replied.

Jon knelt to Ghost. “Be good, boy. I’ll be back.” Ghost licked his hand before sitting on the ground.

Jon braced himself before walking into the deep cavern, not bothered by its pitch blackness and the water dripping inside.

Chapter End Notes

I was listening to Joe Hisaishi's "Path of the Wind" while I was writing the monastery and stair scene. Seemed fitting.

For this story, I wanted to include Japanese/Asian mythology since that would add some spiritual elements. Also, as a follower of the Old Gods, Jon believing in the Yi-Tish spirits doesn't necessarily conflict with his own beliefs since pantheism allowed for belief in several deities like in Greece, Egypt, and Rome. Also, dragons have a different meaning in Asian culture, so I hoped I got that right.

Plus, we see Jon slowly learning but also knowing that he still has a long way to go. We're almost there guys, to a major point. Stay tuned!
Deciding to try a new schedule in order to accommodate my stories. I hope this is acceptable. Please continue to be safe and find things to fight the boredom from social distancing, if you are all feeling it. Enjoy!

"Faster!" Benjen shouted in nihongo as one of his soldiers ran past him. Another soldier tripped in a hole concealed by the tall grass, but it was fortunately not so deep as to seriously injure him. Benjen walked over to the soldier and pulled him up. “Up, soldier! Get a move on!”

Benjen was running alongside the ten men he selected as part of a first stage he planned to get the soldiers back into shape after burning their supply of yapian and paying them their overdue wages. When he called muster the next morning, he found that the soldiers and their weapons were in bad conditions and they would need to undergo some form of retraining if they were to resume normal army duties.

Benjen looked through as much manuals as he could, especially those that dealt with training soldiers, and his first instinct was to use them on his brigade. However, when he outlined his plan to Lieutenant Lim, he was not impressed.

“You doubt that these methods would work, lieutenant?” Benjen asked.

“Captain, the previous commanding officer used those methods to keep the men in battle condition before he succumbed to avarice. While those manuals detail well on how soldiers should drill and what tactics should be used among other things, it also outlines what types of punishments should be meted out if the men fall out of line,” Lim explained.

“Ah,” Benjen nodded in understanding. “And I’m guessing he used those punishments in order to intimidate the soldiers into buying his substances.”

“Exactly,” Lim confirmed.

Benjen read through those punishments. The most common sort of punishment utilized was flogging with a cane, which was carried out by the senior soldier in the company, in which the punished soldier belonged to. If one soldier failed to perform a drill or not turn up to muster on time, then the whole company had to face the consequences, with the officer in charge being removed from the next promotion round before the Captain-General and the soldiers all being flogged. Desertion and insubordination were punished with death or demotion, which happened frequently in the brigade and thus explaining the lowered quality of the soldiers. Dereliction of duty was dealt with through stripping the soldier of his clothes and making him stand outside until the morning muster. As for striking your superiors, you were either dishonorably discharged or executed.

Benjen caught on that his predecessor had abused the punishment system in order to coerce the soldiers into buying his substances and keep them in line. And he was not stupid enough to resort to those punitive measures, as his command would fail at that moment.
As Benjen thought more about it, the manuals listed punishments but rarely deal with rewards. He had a basic understanding of how the reward system in the empire worked, with examples being eight years of service equaling a final pay of five hundred taels and twenty years entitling the soldier to a grant of land, a final pay of a thousand taels, and a certificate that would allow them to pursue many different types of lives. However, those were rewards given to soldiers who served a certain length of time and didn’t cover small actions while they served that merited some benefits. At the Wall, punishment might’ve been strict, but the Lord Commander never physically abused either the recruits or the sworn brothers. Moreover, the Lord Commander knew how to reward those who deserved it, as he did reward Jon with Longclaw after he saved his life from that wight. Something I might have to change.

Benjen’s first priority, however, was to get the men back into prime battle condition. He looked over the list of soldiers who had served the longest, had them report to him before morning muster, and there he outlined his terms.

“All of you have served past the required eight years for those that had joined the army, meaning that you all are seeking the rewards that come after twenty years. I asked you all here because you’ve been in this brigade longer than most of us and therefore, you’re in a good position to set a good example for the rest of the men,” Benjen spoke to all ten of them. Lim stood by him as he translated, since while his hold on nihongo continued to improve, he still couldn’t grasp some words and Lim helped him.

“I might not be familiar with how things are in the empire, but I know what it is to fight and kill. I’ve weathered through harsh conditions in winter, so I have an understanding of the hardships that you all have been through. I am required to get this brigade back into a condition where all of you can perform ably again, so I will show you some things that you need to do before we can progress towards that goal. This seems to be a promising formation of men, so don’t let your potential go to waste,” Benjen finished.

From how the ten men looked at him, Benjen realized that what he said was a welcome change of pace from his predecessor. But don’t assume it’ll be easy.

For now, Benjen had them run through the grasslands, drill them in various exercises taught by the master-at-arms at Winterfell, the one before Ser Rodrik, and had them clean up their uniforms. The whole point was to make them into soldiers again. If they start looking like soldiers, they’ll start feeling like soldiers, and if the gods allow it, they’ll start acting like soldiers.

Benjen made it a point that he would train with them, which Lieutenant Lim protested.

“Captain, a commander must not train with the men,” Lim warned.

“Why not?” The Lord Commander was not above getting his hands dirty, so Benjen didn’t have a problem joining the men.

“Captain, I understand what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to set an example to the troops in order to make yourself different from the previous commander, which is an honorable thing. However, you train with the soldiers, it sets a bad example for the other officers since there is supposed to be a barrier between those who enlisted and those who received their commissions,” Lim pointed out.

“And what exactly is this barrier, lieutenant?” Benjen asked.

Lim took a moment to gather his thoughts, as it was clear that he had never really thought upon it. “With respect, you were never commissioned through the traditional channels. Men like me spent
years studying for the examinations and we advanced through effort and ensuring that the right superior officer is pleased with our performance. That is the reality, since those with higher rank determines who gets to join them from the lower ranks.”

Benjen shook his head. *Not that different from the rest of Westeros, except its lords trying to please higher lords.*

“You might disapprove of such ways of thinking, Captain, but as a highborn, you should understand how the world works. It’s not that different no matter where you go.”

“Possibly,” Benjen admitted. “But I’m a Stark and previous First Ranger of the Night’s Watch. We don’t rely on the goodness of others to advance just because they come from a higher place. And I’ll be damned before I succumb to that way of thinking.”

“Then you’re acting stubborn, captain,” Lim responded. “You command the officers, and the officers command the men. That is the way things work in the army.”

“Well, I’m not from around here and the troops need a more closer touch if I hope to make them ready for battle again,” Benjen shrugged. “If you have a problem with how I do things here, take it up with General Kitara. After all, I never asked for this post and he sent me anyway.”

Lim sighed but was silenced.

“As for the officers, I require their presence in my quarters after noon meals. It’s time I show them who is in charge in case they have any doubts regarding my command style,” Benjen told Lim.

“I would suggest you handle them with tact, captain,” Lim urged. “These are proud men, some of whom have decent pedigrees in the empire, and they may not react well with your straightforwardness.”

“Well, let’s see if they can handle how a Stark deals with problems,” Benjen left Lim with before rejoining the troops in their training.

Benjen had a bowl of rice, warm soup, and pork slices for his noon meal. One benefit of command was that he had his own private quarters and could thus enjoy his meal in silence. He didn’t want to spend more time than was necessary talking to those who might protest his style in front of others, which would put him in an awkward position. *This is what happens when you command men who can fight.*

After a servant took away his meal, Benjen prepared his quarters for when the officers came. Sitting in the most prominent position, higher than the rest, he looked over the other officers assigned to his brigade. Besides Minoru Lim, the brigade lieutenant, there were two officers to each of the five battalions, two officers assigned to each of the battalion’s three companies, and six officers comprising the brigade’s administration such as quartermaster, adjutant, and commanders of the infantry and cavalry.

“Thank you all for coming,” Benjen began while Lim translated. “In case you haven’t noticed, all of you have failed in your duties.” That caught all of their attention. *Good, they should know that I don’t waste time with pleasantries.* “You’re the officers and your responsibility is to ensure that the men are in a condition where they can fight, a responsibility that you have not properly assumed. Now, I don’t care what you received in your examinations. I know that with the exception of Lieutenant Lim, all of you are merely replacements since the previous officers were involved in the yapian distribution. Now, are there considerations to be taken into account? Mayhaps, since you’re all new here just like me. However, you have not fulfilled your duties and this brigade is on the
verge of collapse if things do not turn around soon.”

Benjen eyed each of the officers, all of whom were trying to avoid looking at him directly, either because they could not denying the truth in his words or because they didn’t like what he was saying.

“This brigade will be run differently and I know certain aspects of combat that are unknown in these lands. Whether it would beneficial to the brigade is yet to be seen, but it is time for a change,” Benjen continued. “From now on, all officers are to move their quarters next to the troops. No more separated areas from the enlisted men. Officers will take part in daily training and you shall be more attentive to the troops from this point on. I’ll assume all of you have some understanding of strategy and tactics, but I will require all of you to attend meetings during the afternoon so that you will all be acquainted with the tactics I will show you all.”

With each demand, all of the officers winced. “You can’t do that, captain,” one of the company commanders protested. “We’re officers. We’re not supposed to mingle with the troops.”

“And why not? Because you think you’re better than them?” Benjen spat. “A man gets only what he earns and you’ll be leading these men into battle. But the way I see it, you’re not acting like leaders. That’s what the men view you all as and you all have set a bad example. If we were to engage the enemy right now, you would not survive.”

“And how you would know about us not being prepared?” one of the battalion commanders asked.

“What’s your name?”

“Saeyong Wen, battalion captain,” he replied.

“How long have you served?”

“Twelve years, captain.”

“You’ve seen battle?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Where?”

“I was at the riots in Asabhad.”

Benjen had heard about that disturbance. It had happened a few years ago when the empire was embroiled in its war of three emperors. By that time, one of them was dead and troops from the north were sent in to assist the Governor of the Southeastern Province in restoring order. However, it was a mess and fifty thousand civilians were killed alongside ten thousand soldiers due to mismanagement and soldiers who were too eager to kill.

“Well, Captain Wen, I’m afraid you have not seen real battle,” Benjen was not going to lie to him. Captain Wen looked at him, insulted. “What happened in Asabhad was an occurrence involving unarmed people. By battle, I am referring to fighting those who could kill you as well as you can kill them. That’s how I view real battle, since the enemy won’t just lie down and bury their heads in the dirt at the sight of your blade.”

Captain Wen was close to fuming, but he respected the command structure and thus calmed down. *Might need to keep an eye on that one.*
“I might not have fought against the enemies lurking in the steppes, but I have plenty of experience dealing with peoples who resisted organized forces. So I ask you all, work with me in restoring this brigade. It’ll make not just my job easier, but all of ours since we wouldn’t have to worry about the man next to us not performing to the best of our abilities. If you choose not to do so, write your request for another assignment and I will submit them to General Kitara. I won’t force you to stay here against your will,” Benjen offered.

Some of the officers looked tempted to take him up on his offer, which was exactly what Benjen expected.

“You have till the end of the week to make your decision. But think very carefully about it. You request another assignment while the brigade is still in bad shape, your superiors will think only two possibilities. The first is that I have failed in my duties and the officers who want another assignment do not want to stick by their commander. The second is that the officers are trying to save their reputations by not being associated with a brigade believed to be in decline. Both possibilities will not end well for you all, as officers are supposed to fulfill their commitments to the army as best as they can and requesting another assignment is essentially saying to your superiors that you are choosing not to. Thus, whatever reputations you think you have will be destroyed,” Benjen outlined.

The officers who were tempted to request another assignment became hesitant, as Benjen’s words made sense.

“Dismissed,” Benjen ordered before the officers went out of the room. He turned to Lieutenant Lim and spoke in the common tongue. “If you wish another assignment, Lieutenant, I will understand. I’ll speak to General Kitara and I’m sure that he’ll have you transferred to another brigade.”

Minoru Lim pursed his lips in thought, as if also tempted to take up Benjen’s offer. “Well, Captain, I don’t intend to leave anytime soon.”

“Why is that?”

“Yes, this brigade is in a terrible condition and the temptation to be transferred to another brigade is quite strong. However, as you said, if I do try to do that, it will not bode well for my reputation. If you do succeed in getting this brigade back to full strength and successfully leading the troops in combat, then I wouldn’t have to worry about my reputation since I’ll be among the officers who helped restore the brigade,” Lim stated.

Benjen had to remind himself that Lieutenant Lim might have been fair, but no matter what, a snitch always looked out for himself and Lim’s words at that moment showed to him that he would only help him if it didn’t cause any damage to his reputation. *This is why nobody trusts those who snitched on others.*

“Well, glad to hear that you’re standing by,” Benjen kept up appearances. “You may take your leave, lieutenant.”

“Captain,” Lim dipped his head before leaving Benjen’s quarters.

As he sat back down and looked over the final scrolls before he would retire back to Kushiro, Benjen’s thoughts turned to Westeros. Ned had taken Arya and Sansa to King’s Landing, which would not have turned out well for them since Ned was dead. And the news Lord Joon said about Robb becoming King in the North, Benjen thought on how the northmen were led to such a drastic action. He understood that the northmen cared little for what happened in the south and that Ned’s
death might have spurred them into declaring their separation from the Iron Throne, but there was something else going on.

The Starks had ruled the North for thousands of years and any attempt from the south to subjugate the northmen ended badly, with dragons being the only thing that prompted Torrhen Stark to bend the knee to the Targaryens. The wounds inflicted by Aerys and to a lesser extent Robert Baratheon made the northmen all the more disinclined to be involved in southern affairs, but Ned being executed by Joffrey, who in Benjen’s mind was an arrogant and atrocious boy, was the final straw. *It was bound to happen one way or the other, but I’m not sure of their ability to succeed, even if it’s my people.*

Like Jon, Benjen began to think that he might be betraying his family by not going back to help. Robb was inexperienced in war and in the schemes that happened between the lords of Westeros, and a kingship would only make his position unstable than it already was. Sansa was too taken with stories of knights and princes and flowers, all of which she associated with Joffrey. *By the gods,* Benjen rubbed his temples. Arya was a child and was not in a position to do anything to help her family. *She’s like Lyanna, but our mother never tried to limit her while Catelyn did.* Brandon was a cripple and Rickon was too young to do anything. In total, the situation of the Starks looked bleak, as much as it pained Benjen to accept that.

His first instinct was to return to Westeros in order to help his family, as he was the oldest living Stark after Ned and he might have things to offer Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon in regards to the important lessons of life. However, they wouldn’t know of what he saw north of the Wall and they would assume that he deserted the Night’s Watch. Just like with Ned, Robb might be bound by honor to put him down on a trunk and lob his head off and might think that Benjen’s words regarding the threat of the Long Night were merely excuses to avoid punishment.

Benjen might have held his honor dearly just like the Starks, but even he had to admit that honor could only carry a man so far before it fails him. He didn’t say it in front of Ned, but he was very concerned with his brother going to King’s Landing, considering what had happened to Brandon and their father. *And now that viper’s nest killed Ned, and Joffrey is responsible.* Robert would never harm Ned, but Joffrey was not Robert and he was much more unrestrained in his cruelty.

As for Joon Kitara, Benjen saw that he had honor, devoted to his family, and never treated anyone with cruelty, but at the same time, he was no pushover. He knew how to keep his troops in line while dealing with potentially troublesome subordinates and officials in very subtle ways. He was also capable of anger, but was very selective in how he showed it, so everything he did had a purpose. From what he had read of Cregan Stark, Benjen saw much of his famed ancestor in Lord Joon, but many times more restrained and skilled at the great “game of thrones”, if such a thing applied to the empire.

As he thought more about it, Benjen attempting to return to Westeros at this point would do him and his family no good. He might have been the First Ranger of the Night’s Watch, but no one would heed his advice on leadership and battle since the black brothers were not given wide regard in Westeros. He had no lands or keeps and didn’t have anything to offer to his family, as he had taken an oath of celibacy and therefore had no children to take over Winterfell should the main line be wiped out. Therefore, he was practically useless to the Starks of Winterfell, just like Jon would be if he returned to Westeros.

In the empire, Benjen now commanded real soldiers and utilizing his experiences in a productive manner. Lord Joon and Lieutenant Lim both spoke the common tongue well and he could tell that he was already on the troops’ good side for paying their overdue wages. However, he still had a long way to go before he could call his time in command a success and he hadn’t led them in
So that was when Benjen decided to accept the reality of his situation. He was useless to his family and he lacked the experiences necessary to command armies or towards other important purposes. As he believed in the way of the gods, everyone and everything had a purpose and like Jon, he was meant to be in Yi-Ti.

As he rode back to Kushiro, where Seong Kitara and his mother Myung welcomed him back, Benjen thought about Jon and Lord Joon as they were in the Mountains of the Morn. He also noticed that Lord Joon took Dark Sister and Aemon’s dragon egg with him. Whatever he finds there, I hope it’ll do him well. I must accept that besides being a Stark, he is a Targaryen, the blood of the dragon.

Jon walked deeper into the cave, struggling to see through the pitched blackness. Gripping Dark Sister more tightly to him and Aemon’s red dragon egg in his right hand, he calmed himself through the various breathing techniques that Hoon Ti taught him in order to manage anxious circumstances.

While he couldn’t see clearly, Jon felt something… pulling him further inside. Something in the cave was calling out to him and he couldn’t resist whatever it was. His eyes kept staring in the darkness of the cave and he continued moving forward.

Suddenly, Jon heard something a shriek echoing in the cave. As his eyes became adjusted to the dark, he saw something move. Gulping, he put the red dragon egg into his robes while getting his hands on the pommel of Dark Sister. Him seeing the kodama put him on edge, as it showed to Jon that there were indeed other mystical beings in existence in the world. While the kodama seemed harmless, whatever was residing in the cave must’ve been more… sinister from how it sounded. Being in the dark certainly didn’t help ease his worries.

Walking more slowly, Jon’s eyes looked around the cave. Then, he heard the shriek again and he drew Dark Sister. It felt… surreal to Jon, holding the sword of Visenya Targaryen and one that continued to be used by those such as Daemon Targaryen and Bloodraven. He felt the history behind the sword and it felt… empowering to Jon. My ancestors before me have held this blade, so this must be their way of protecting me in the afterlife.

Hearing the shriek yet again, Jon got into a combat stance and readied himself for what was coming. What he did not expect was something emerging from the side of the cavern, which was glowing brightly and looked at him with a sense of curiosity as it licked its arms.

Looking closely to the creature, Jon saw that it was a cross between a dog and a monkey, had gray fur, a peach-colored belly, floppy ears, arms outstretched as though it is caught mid-shrug, and had a large grin, which made him uncomfortable given their surroundings.

“Why are you smiling, monkey?” Jon asked first in guanhua. The creature simply kept smiling before it got on all fours and moved deeper into the cave. “Where you going?” Jon sheathed Dark Sister before running after the creature, or whatever it was.

Finally, after what seemed like an endless run in the dark, Jon arrived at a larger cave opening. It was white all over with a mix of orange and various conical rock shapes covered many parts of the cave. There were boulders, open areas between the conical rock shapes, and other caverns that led to more of the mountain.

But what caught Jon’s attention was the pool in the middle of the cave, as well as the opening in
the cave’s ceiling, in which the sun’s rays blared through. Stepping closer to the pool, he took a whiff but immediately jerked back. “This isn’t water,” he said to himself.

Looking around, Jon saw a boulder next to the pool, which had inscriptions. Kneeling in front of the rock, he knew that it was some form of guanhua, but he didn’t recognize most of the characters, as they must’ve belonged to an ancient tongue. The one character that he did recognize was “god.” Considering what Abbot Cao had told of this mountain, this must’ve been a place of sacred value to the monastery.

Jon heard another shriek again, making him turn around before he saw the creature again. “Oh, it’s you,” he calmed down. “You might not understand me, but do you know what this place is?” The creature kept grinning. “Right, you don’t know what I am talking about.”

Resigned, Jon sat down on a boulder. “It doesn’t make any sense,” Jon thought aloud. “I feel something drawing me to this place, but I don’t see anything. The abbot said that I would find answers here, but all I’ve found is some monkey who can’t stop smiling and a rock that I cannot understand.” Jon was not one for despair, but being in an unknown land and seeing new kinds of spirits made him question everything he knew. “What am I supposed to do here? Sit around and wait for something to happen? I’ve been doing that my entire life.”

Jon pulled out the red dragon egg. “And I like Uncle Aemon’s gift, but what purpose will this serve since I don’t have anything to hatch this?”

Jon looked at the creature again, who looked at the pool with… nervousness. What? Then, the creature scurried off into the darkness of the cave. “Wait a moment. Come back!” he called out in vain.


Keeping his hands from shaking uncontrollably, Jon stood up and readied Dark Sister while keeping his grip on the dragon egg tight. “I… am Daeron. Daeron Targaryen,” Jon managed.

Without warning, the surface of the pool rippled and Jon saw movement from beneath it. Then, out came possibly the most magnificent and terrifying thing that Jon had seen. It had a long body like a snake and sharp claws like a hawk, as it emerged from the pool and clawed past him. It then climbed onto the walls of the cave and circled around Jon once, allowing him see the golden and red scales on it and the teeth it bared.

Then, it stopped circling and rested at the opposite end of the pool, with its yellow eyes staring at Jon. He struggled to control his breathing, as its eyes were easily terrifying.

“You can hear me?” it called out to him in Jon’s mind.

Jon nodded nervously. “Yes.”

“No man has been able to hear my voice in over fifteen thousand years.” It enlarged its nostrils and sniffed the air. “I smell something from you, especially your blood.”

“I am the blood of the dragon,” Jon answered.

“Truly?”

“Yes. My father was Rhaegar Targaryen and my mother was Lyanna Stark. The blood of old Valyria and that of the First Men run through me,” Jon kept calm.
“Hmmm, I haven’t heard those names in centuries,” it responded. “Why are you here?”

“I’ve come to seek answers regarding what I should do,” Jon replied.

“You here to burden me with the trivialities of man?” it asked with a hint of impatience.

“No. I don’t know what to do in regards to who I am and what I should do in order to return home with help to face a threat, one that would endanger us all.”

“You’re referring to the Long Night?”

That stunned Jon. “How did you know that?”

It sighed. “I’ve lived long before man breathed his first, and I shall be here long after the last man dies, so I know everything you already know about the Long Night, although it happened quite differently in these lands than where you come from.”

“The Long Night affected Yi-Ti also?” Jon pressed.

“Yes. I was there when the Great Empire of the Dawn began, only for it to collapse when the Bloodstone Emperor married a tiger-woman and brought death, slavery, and suffering onto the people while eating human flesh and attempting to cast us down in order to worship a black stone. People call this the Blood Betrayal and the Long Night saw the Maiden-Made-of-Light and the Lion of Night showing their ruthlessness upon man. It all ended when a warrior assembled an army of the virtuous and destroyed the great evil with a sword made of fire, but the Great Empire never came back and all those who fought with this warrior went their separate ways for they feared each other. War, lust, murder, and the other sins of man endured from that,” it explained.

“That’s similar to how people at home know of the Long Night. But we call him the last hero,” Jon said, astonished.

“People have different names for the one that ended the darkness,” it answered. “The last hero, Yin Tar, Neferion, the Warrior of Light… Azor Ahai. But what he did ended the darkness all over the world, which saw many dangers emerge for several generations.”

Jon remained stunned, as he was talking to something that had witnessed Azor Ahai, the supposed savior from the darkness and one who many in Essos had called “the prince who was promised.”

“And you were there?” Jon asked.

“Yes. After all, I came down here from the heavens to see if I could lend my assistance to this warrior, but alas, the only form that I could assume was a dragon and people merely saw me as a creature of good luck, which put my plans in jeopardy.”

“You certainly don’t look like a dragon,” Jon thought of dragons as the ones he had seen in the books, with wings, long necks, and large horned heads breathing fire.

“The dragons you think of were merely… creatures that had evolved from wyrms. One of the gods decided to imbue her mark on those wyrms and out came the dragon as you know it. But what the god didn’t expect was that her touch allowed these wyrms to develop some independent thought, which made them more than beasts who could breath fire. That is why your Valyrians were so renowned, as they came up with techniques that utilized the dragons without compromising the dragons’ own thought. As for me, my form would never be understood by man, so I had to assume a form of a dragon, just not the one you think of,” it clarified.

“And dragons look differently across the world?” Jon asked further.
“Well, my form is associated with a type of dragon spawned in Asshai, but it is incredibly difficult for firemages to reproduce something that only those with divinity could assume. That’s why there are so few of us and we do not show ourselves to the outside world unwillingly.”

Jon nodded, somehow understanding the dragon’s position. But he had to come back to the reason why he was here.

“I know what you’re thinking. You want my advice on how to get the help you need to take back with you when you eventually return home and fight the threat of the Long Night. Unfortunately, man will always kill each other and there’s nothing we can do about it. Best let man take care of his own problems,” the dragon said dismissively.

“But not all men want to kill,” Jon protested. “Yes, we have to do it out of necessity but not all of us take pleasure in doing it.”

“You’re right,” the dragon admitted. “But I’ve lived longer than you have, boy. Much longer. And I know that man will come up with more excuses to kill each other. People will always succumb to their baser instincts, so why should I help you save those wretches from a so-called threat that is above them in mind and energy?”

Jon scoffed, aghast at the god’s callousness. “If that’s what’s you really think, then you can go to the seven hells.”

The dragon suddenly glided over the pool and was so close that its snout almost touched Jon’s face, but Jon could see the anger behind the dragon’s eyes. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. While I came for answers, I didn’t come here out of some selfish reasoning. I came here because I want to go back home and help my family. But I can’t help them like this. I need strength, I need power, and I need more if I am to go back and save my family. Also, my aunt is somewhere in the wilderness, among those who would do her harm. I have to help her, since I’ve lost family already and I can’t afford to lose more. So smite me or help me. Your choice,” Jon was not going to beg, even if he was talking to a god.

“You dare address a god in this manner?” the dragon asked, anger lacing its voice.

“Gods should help people, not stand by while they kill each other. Maybe that’s the difference between you and us, because we still try to make things right even if we fall. But from how I look at you, you gave up.” Jon retorted. “If there’s anyone at fault, it’s you, because you’re not using all of your so-called powers and just hiding here in this cave. You’re wasting your abilities.”

The dragon growled before looking at the egg. “I assume that’s a dragon egg.” Jon nodded, while the dragon calmed down and sighed. “You remind me of someone I met thousands of years ago and he had the same spirit as you did. But he knew what he was doing and was prepared to live with the consequences. The question I ask is, can you live with the consequences of your actions?”

Jon bobbed his head. “I already am. I’m ready if more come my way.”

“I hope so, for your sake,” the dragon arched his head backward. “The problem with gods like me is that people rely on us too much, so without us, they become crippled. One piece of advice that I will grant to you is this: find your own way in the world, as the gods help those who help themselves. That’s a truth that man has not taken to heart and lead to much despair. Do you think you can help yourself, Daeron?”

Jon exhaled before nodding again. “I only had myself to rely on since I was born. I can do it.”
The dragon then eyed the dragon egg. “Then… your blood should be enough to unlock what the
gift I shall give you.”

“What?”

Without warning, the dragon opened its mouth and breathed a fire filled with many colors to Jon.
He covered himself, but as he opened his eyes, he found that he was surrounded by flames and
besides his garments, his skin was untouched. And the fires around him felt… warm. It was as if
new life was breathing into him.

But as Jon became used to his surroundings of fire, he saw another figure faintly in the distance.
Trudging slowly, he saw that the figure had silver hair and violet eyes, crouching over three dragon
eggs and a Dothraki corpse. “Daenerys?”

While still engulfed in flames, Daenerys’ head moved upwards and she turned to see Jon standing
there, red dragon egg in his hand while she was huddling over here three.

“It’s you again,” Daenerys said with surprise before she noticed his dragon egg. “That egg, it’s red.”

“Aye,” Jon confirmed. “A gift from our relative, who very much misses us.”

“I thought I was alone, but now I see,” Daenerys stood up and walked closer to Jon. He was
embarrassed at having to show his bareness to his aunt, but she seemed more focused on his egg
and his eyes. “You are the blood of the dragon, but where are you?”

Before Jon could answer, he heard a crack in his hand. Looking down, he saw that the red dragon
egg was moving and a mark formed on its shell. Daenerys also noticed this.

“This is more than a vision,” Daenerys stared at the egg with wonder. “It’s really happening.”

Jon couldn’t believe it himself. He looked to Daenerys’ eggs, which were also moving and
cracking. “You should look to your eggs, Daenerys.”

Daenerys turned around and walked back, holding all of the eggs as gently as she could. “So my
dreams were true. Dragons are coming back.”

Jon smiled. “They are.”

“You know my name, but I don’t know yours,” Daenerys kept looking at Jon while the eggs were
close to hatching.

As Jon’s egg was close to hatching also, he looked around and saw that the fires were dying around
them, meaning that their shared vision was coming to an end. But he would not leave without
answering his aunt. “I am Daeron Targaryen. And we will meet again.”

Daenerys nodded. “We shall,” and with that, the fires died and Jon found himself in the cave once
again, but with the god-dragon gone.

Looking down, Jon saw that his robes were burnt off and his instinct was to cover his intimate
parts out of shame.

However, something crawled from his back and Jon turned to his right shoulder, to see… a red
dragon hatchling. It was shrieking but it soon nudged Jon’s neck. He then sensed that the hatchling
was a she and he moved to stroke her chin with his finger, which she eagerly accepted.
A dragon…. I have a dragon on my shoulder! Jon felt as if he was in a dream, as it had been over a century since the world saw dragons alive. From a bastard to a dragonlord, Jon thought.

At the same time, Jon saw how precious the red dragon was and she moved from one shoulder to the other, exploring her new companion.

Still in wonder, Jon pondered on what name he could give her. He knew all of the dragon names from the books, but it was still a pain to choose which fit best. Then, he remembered one dragon from the Dance, which was ridden by the Queen Who Never Was. Had circumstances been different, that dragon and her rider could have lived for a very long time. Just like with Ghost, he was going to protect this dragon until his dying breath.

“I will protect you… Meleys,” Jon spoke to his dragon. She chirped, accepting the name. Preparing himself, Jon picked up Dark Sister and headed back the way he came. And we shall meet the other dragons eventually.

As Daenerys walked out of the pyre, with Jorah Mormont and what was left of those that remained with her, she felt the power coming from her dragons clinging to her body. She had taken a chance by going into the flames without knowing what would happen and her dragon blood protected her while bringing back dragons to the world. But besides that, she felt nothing but affection for the three hatchlings.

As the one she called Drogon clawed onto her shoulder, he looked eastwards and shrieked. Daenerys was puzzled until she could make out what Drogon was saying. *I feel… one more there.*

Daenerys knew that Drogon was talking about that red dragon egg, which must’ve hatched, and the handsome man who she saw in the vision of flames. She would figure out how exactly he and she were connected, but at that moment, she felt joy for the first time since Drogo and her child died. Her dragons had hatched, but there was another dragon and another of her blood further east.

*Daeron Targaryen… be safe out there. We shall meet.*

Chapter End Notes

And there we go! Jon has his own dragon while he meets Daenerys as she's hatching hers. I thought naming her Meleys was quite fitting and I hope I dealt with it well.

The conversation with the dragon god was something I was worried about, since I had to take some inspiration from other works and films that deal with mortals talking with deities (usually, it's one-sided). I hope I created a more balanced yet insightful take on the mortal vs. deity debate.

Hope I met expectations and from here on out, Jon's life will take a turn. Stay tuned.
A Step Into Uncertainty

Chapter Notes

Hope you are still safe and that these crazy times can end.

Here is the new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam galloped along with Lord Joon towards Tiqui in one of the usual trips around the Northwest Province. Along with the regular escort, the two traveled through the extensive grasslands of the empire’s northern reaches as Joon visited various imperial officials, landed lords, and army officers posted to several points along the boundaries with the steppes.

After the two stopped for the night at the home of Salik Hong, Lord of Keizyo, Sam was treated to the usual hospitality of lords in the empire. There was a feast, music, good conversations, and dancers of both genders. It was also the first time that Sam was looked after by a woman wearing elaborate robes and covered in heavy white powder on her face. He was not unfamiliar with how women freshened themselves everyday, as it was normal for women back in Westeros to whiten their face and rouge their cheeks. But this woman had so much powder on her face that it looked completely pale white, paler than the Valyrians of old from what Sam knew.

The woman, like others who served Joon, Lord Hong, and the other male guests, showed skill at different arts of the empire. She could play various instruments and perform beautiful renditions classical YiTiSh music. When the occasions arose, she could put on dancing performance and entrance those with lovely poetry. Sam learned that poetry in YiTi was called haiku and this woman, whose name was Eunsoo, came up with one that Sam would remember for a long time:

“Near break of the day
where a narrow, soft bed blew
enjoying the wind”

There was something simplistic and yet so rhythmic about that haiku. Sam was only inclined to read books, not create words from scratch, which made him rethink everything he thought he knew about life and the world. There were so many things that he couldn’t know from books alone, and learning how to craft a verse such as the haiku was something that would take time for Sam to learn.

He then remembered when Adjutant Dae made him that offer to get him a permanent post in the empire in exchange for Quartermaster Shin’s intelligence reports in their unedited form. He talked it over with Benjen, who shook his head.

“And you said that you needed time to make a decision?”

“Yes, Benjen,” Sam answered.

“Not giving a straight answer to a complicated question… smart,” Benjen nodded approvingly. “As you probably understand, you cannot trust what Adjutant Dae is offering you. Nothing good can come from what he wants with those intelligence reports, even though I find working with
Quartermaster Shin incredibly tiresome.”

“What confuses me is how… threatened Adjutant Dae felt when he talked about the quartermaster being a commoner. I should have expected it, since highborns don’t usually occupy the same space as a lowborn. However, he seemed to have taken great offense at that, even though the adjutant comes from a family with a title and a close connection with the Prime Minister,” Sam divulged to Benjen.

“You haven’t been paying attention to your lessons, Sam,” Benjen lightly scolded. “He’s from a merchant family, just like my lieutenant.”

“I would assume that given their ability to make coin, merchants would have some status in the empire,” Sam forgot a significant detail about how society worked in Yi-Ti.

Benjen sighed. “Right, I sometimes forgot, but this is not one of those days. Do you remember why our tutor emphasized the difference between commoners and merchants?”

Sam scratched his head, trying to remember what was taught. Finally, it came back to him. “Even though merchants can earn more coin, they are below the commoners.”

Benjen grinned. “Now you remember.”

Society in Yi-Ti was arranged differently from how it was in Westeros. While there were still lords ruling over the land and commoners working it, the merchants were ranked lower than commoners. The reason for this peculiar arrangement was because Yi-Ti followed a line of thought that had arranged society into four categories. At the top were the those with titles and estates, and those who attained positions in the empire through the examination system, all of whom were below the imperial family. Below them were the commoners who worked the land and they were seen as essential to harmony since the empire largely depended on farming and thus had to remain where they were. Below the commoners were the artisans and craftsmen, who contributed to society by building structures, making goods, and other activities deemed essential to harmony but were not treated with the same regard as farming commoners since they had no land that the empire could tax. That is a strange reason to treat them lesser.

At the bottom were the merchants. The empire acknowledged them as having crucial roles in the economy, but they were seen as grave threats to harmony due to their ability to gain massive incomes, manipulate or take over certain parts of the economy, and potentially exploit the farming commoners. That was probably the most confusing aspect for Sam. In Westeros, people with land, coin, or both would be treated with much regard and especially lords paramount had both to spare. Coin made the world go round, but that apparently gave reason for whoever created such a strange arrangement to treat the coin earners with much disrepute.

“And Kang Shin is technically ranked higher than Adjutant Dae despite his family not possessing significant estates and titles,” Sam realized. “The only reason the adjutant can claim to be above the quartermaster is that his father has a lordship.”

“Correct,” Benjen nodded. “And that has to make you think. What did the adjutant’s family do for the prime minister that would allow them to possess such a privilege? If I had to choose, I would say that the adjutant’s father purchased the lordship from YiTish court and pleased the right person.”

“But the uncertainty that came with his former position is still there,” Sam understood further. “Maybe that’s why he wants those intelligence reports. He seeks to undermine the quartermaster, because he resents that he is ranked above him in the army and had the superior position at birth.”
“That’s a strong possibility,” Benjen assessed. “Lieutenant Lim told me that the only way for merchants to progress in the empire is to take the examinations, either join the army or obtain a position at court, and move up from there. If all ended well, then they would be allowed to remain in the top category while using their mercantile income to purchase land, keeps, and other types of property that would be associated with nobility. From there, the merchant family can start new generations where they could eventually gain a title. That’s the exact plan that Lieutenant Lim’s family has in mind. Already, he told me that his father obtained five thousand acres in the south, which is quite something since land and property in the southern provinces are very hard to get due to their prices.”

“You seem to know very much about the merchants,” Sam became astonished at how knowledgeable Jon’s uncle had revealed himself to be.

“Well, Lieutenant Lim is from a merchant family and he revealed a lot of things to me,” Benjen shrugged. “However, I’m being careful as to how much I tell him. Just because he tells me some important information about his family doesn’t mean that I will return his gesture. He might be a fair officer, but his first concerns are all to himself, and his family is an important part of that.”

“And are you sure that this is not simply prejudice against the lieutenant because he snitched on the previous officers?” Sam noticed the slight hints of disdain Benjen held for his subordinate.

“I don’t feel sorry for what happened to my predecessor and the lieutenant was right to inform Lord Joon. However, he didn’t do it because he was concerned about the troops. He did it to save his own skin because the other officers were planning to kill him. He might say more things in his defense, but why didn’t he do so before the yapian problem got out of control?” Benjen pointed out.

Sam shared Benjen’s disdain for snitches, considering that the Redwyne twins told his father that he was not taken to the sword when he visited the Arbor, and that servants at Horn Hill informed his father of him spending time in the library, which prompted the Tarly lord to either force him to the training yard or give him more rebukes. But considering the situation from Lieutenant Lim’s perspective, Sam had some understanding to what he felt. Either he informed the general or he would die, similar to what his father had threatened him with. Despite the appearances, people here in this land are becoming more like those in Westeros, more than I would be comfortable with.

Sam reflected briefly on when he turned down Adjutant Dae’s offer, who had reacted badly as expected and threatened him some more, before he returned to the present. Eunsoo sat down next to Sam and started to pour tea in his cup.

“Where are you from, my lord?” Eunsoo asked in guanhua.

“Westeros, the Reach kingdom,” Sam replied in guanhua, his hold on the tongue having improved the most out of Jon and Benjen.

“Tell me what it is like over there,” she finished pouring Sam’s tea.

“What would you like to know?” Sam knew that this woman was trying to make conversation with him and decided to indulge her.

“Tell me of this… Reach kingdom.”

Sam told Eunsoo about the long history behind the kingdom that had been founded by the Gardener kings, who had descended from the legendary Garth Gardener, and how many houses including his own can claim descent from such a figure. He then talked about how Aegon’s
Conquest wiped out the Gardeners before they were replaced by the Tyrells and thus beginning a new chapter for the Reach. Afterwards, Sam talked about how rich the Reach kingdom was, with its vast harvests and fine wines.

“Your home seems quite… eventful,” Eunsoo noted.

“Not exactly,” Sam admitted. “There are many knights in the Reach and much knowledge can be found in Oldtown, but besides that, it’s just another land.”

“Can the same thing not be said of the empire?” Eunsoo asked.

“Possibly, but from what I know, men could work their way up here in society if they give enough effort and meet the right people,” Sam answered.

“And people in Westeros can’t do that?”

“You could, but it’s just incredibly difficult. For commoners, you can get a knighthood at the most if you do something quite heroic. Other than that, highborns such as myself enjoy most of the benefits the Seven Kingdoms offer.”

“Why did you choose to come here then? It seems that you have had a good life in this Reach,” Sam’s eyes darkened at Eunsoo’s word. “Or not. But what do you have to complain it? You have it easier than most people in the world.”

Sam sighed. “Sometimes, that’s not a good thing.”

“Only those who haven’t come to terms with who they are would say that.”

Sam blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t know about your family, but it seems as if you were not living up to expectations. The way I see it, many will fail at they’re expected to do, but only a few succeed at being who they are. You cannot deny that your life experiences have been valuable into shaping how you view the world, even if they do contain pain. Every moment matters, and that’s something that I was able to realize,” Eunsoo said.

“And this is the life you chose?” Sam had to ask.

“Yes,” Eunsoo answered confidently. “Most married women in the empire have to be meek and submissive. But as a hostess, I can be as expressive and unrestrained as I want, so long as the guests are pleased. That’s more than what most women can hope to get.”

Sam listened intently as he learned something new yet again. Most women would balk at the idea of serving others, but here was a woman who embraced it. And what she had said about married women was painfully true, as his own mother was not strong enough to do anything to stop his father’s incessant rebukes and force-training sessions.

Sam drank his tea, which had become cold. “This is good,” he said, attempting to switch the topic. Eunsoo looked ready to say more, but chose not to and smiled as she poured him another cup of tea.

Looking at her soft black hair, round brown eyes, small nose, and lips that were neither thick nor thin, Sam felt a certain… attraction to this woman. “Eunsoo, are you married?”
Eunsoo looked at him, taken aback. “Why do you ask, my lord?”

“A pretty woman like yourself, I’m sure that any man would be fortunate to have you as their wife,” Sam meant that.

Eunsoo blushed slightly. “Why, thank you. But I would ask that you don’t have any ideas. I already have a good life as it is and I don’t need anything else.”

“You don’t have a husband?” Sam asked rhetorically.

“And don’t need one. Besides, you’re not the first man to have asked me for my hand.”

Sam shook his head quickly. “No, no, no. You misunderstand—”

Eunsoo smiled smugly. “Don’t try to deny it, my lord. I’ve seen that look on many guests and I know what you are thinking. But as I said, I don’t need anything else. And you only see what you want to see, not what is really there.”

Sam’s forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Many men like a certain idea of a woman, but when that idea is stripped away, men lash out like babes. Trust me, I’ve seen my share of men shouting at me because they didn’t expect me to have a mind of my own out of all things,” Eunsoo rolled her eyes. “And I don’t see you being any different.”

“You don’t know me very well.” Sam wasn’t appreciating how uncomfortable Eunsoo was making him.

“I don’t need to,” she shook her head. “Plus, you wouldn’t like me anyway given time. I’ve seen things that a boy like yourself couldn’t stomach, so… I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay, but also, try to keep it in control.”

“What in control?” Sam laughed nervously.

“Your cock, and how you control it would mean the difference between you saving it for the right person or you being whoremonger. Something to think about.”

As Sam and Joon left Lord Hong’s keep the next morning, he thought about what Eunsoo told him. It was true that he didn’t know very much about women and what she said made him incredibly uncomfortable, but at the same time, did he become that way because it was the truth?

As much as his father was hard on him and even stated clearly that he was not fit to wield Heartsbane, he was devoted to his wife and never took another woman into his bed. Unfortunately, not all lords in Westeros had his father’s sense of propriety and Sam lost count of how many times he had met those carrying the name “Flowers.” And what Eunsoo said about him controlling his cock made sense, perhaps too much, since she was basically criticizing how many men judge their manhood.

“I see you have that woman on your mind, Lord Tarly,” Joon observed as Tiqui came within sight. Sam nodded. “Don’t let whatever she said get to you. Most women like her have the ability to act however they wish, but those like your Eunsoo have been shunned and abused by others for their entire lives. So, do you really think that what she told you can be counted as wisdom?”

Now that Joon mentioned it, Sam did sense a hint of bitterness when Eunsoo described how men became disappointed when their expectations were not met. “Possibly, but should we discount their
opinions because they’re bitter?” Sam asked.

“People who have something to grind against others are not exactly the most reliable types,” Joon said. “Take for example your King Robert. He had such hatred for your Prince Rhaegar because he did something that many disapproved of. But once he killed Rhaegar, what happened afterwards? He stumbled onto your Iron Throne, ruled your realm like one would run a brothel, and then started to behave like any other pimp. He got his revenge, but was it worth it in in the end?”

“No,” Sam couldn’t deny Joon’s logic yet again.

“That answer is even more distressing given what I had just learned about Daeron. And I have to ask myself if he has anything to grind against those that killed his father, both of them? It’s certainly powerful motivation, but if that is his only one, then he’s doomed to repeat the same mistakes as the ones who came before him.”

“What are you suggesting, my lord?” Sam asked.

“If Jon wants to take proper vengeance, he has to show himself worthy of being a ruler. He must learn how to make decisions, understand strategy, and learn how powerful people deal with each other. Otherwise, he’s not going to be of use to anyone.”

“My lord, may I ask why do you care whether Jon becomes such a person?” Sam had to know.

Joon took a moment to collect his thoughts. “I guess… when I saw him emerge bare from that cave with that dragon on his shoulder, I began to see what Lord Benjen said about us having a purpose in the world. Daeron’s a good boy, but he must be shown the right direction if he wishes to return home in strength and in good condition. Just like you, Lord Tarly, Daeron has much to learn about how the world really works and possibly, your arrival was determined by the gods.”

When Sam saw Jon and Joon return, with the red dragon he aptly called Meleys at his side, he never felt more reverent in his life. His visits to the sept had been devoid of meaning now that he looked back on it, while he could gain some comfort in front of the Old Gods. But seeing a dragon return to the world was something that he never would have dreamed of seeing. And Jon talked about three others further west, which were all with Daenerys Targaryen. Things are starting to change, truly.

“So… will this mean that you will support Jon’s claim?” Sam asked hopefully.

Joon shook his head. “As I said, the Targaryen name means nothing here and it wouldn’t be prudent of me to support the claim of a scion of a deposed dynasty. However, given that his only relative is just as lost as in these lands as he is, I will do what I can. But also understand this: a baby dragon cannot be a secret forever and soon, someone with more nefarious intentions might seek him out and that could put my family at risk.”

“So, are you saying…” Sam already knew what Joon was going to promise.

“If I had to choose between protecting you three and protecting my family, I will not hesitate to let you three be fed to the beasts. I might like you three and I do enjoy all of your company, but know that I would choose my family over anything else.”

Sam was struck at how brutally honest their host was, but if he had to admit, he would think the same thing also. As much as I dislike it, father does love his children. Just not me. “Understood, my lord.”

“Good,” and the two rode the rest of the short way to Tiqui without another word.
This time, they would conduct all of their official business in the magistrate’s compound. As people lined up to pay their taxes and Sam recorded each amount in the books, the magistrate and Joon shared a cup of tea, despite the latter’s dislike for him.

The magistrate, the same one they had met those few moons ago and who Jon faced down, still assumed that Sam didn’t understand guanhua well, so he spoke so loud that Sam could hear from across the courtyard. “My lord, why do you keep these white devils in your castle?” the magistrate asked.

Joon put down his cup. “That’s none of your concern, magistrate. And be careful of your tone.”

The magistrate put his hands up in deference. “My apologies, my lord. However, I have to ask. Why keep these men in your house, especially since they don’t know how to respect those authority?”

“You are referring to that boy with the white wolf?”

“If you can call it that,” the magistrate scoffed. “That boy showed disrespect for our laws and not only did you not punish him, you allowed that Chogo whore under your roof.”

“Spare me your complaints, magistrate. I had more than my share after my cavalry commander protested my decision. And what I say to you are the same words that I said to him: ‘I don’t have to tell you of matters pertaining to my household.’”

The magistrate swallowed. “Of course, my lord. It’s not my business to know. But at the same time, such disrespect to how our laws are followed cannot go without punishment.”

“And he was,” Joon answered briskly.

“No, I mean that I must submit a complaint to the capital regarding this incident. I’m sure that the court would send someone to investigate the matter and that your white guest would be punished accordingly,” the magistrate said.

“And you would circumvent my authority in that way?” Joon narrowed his eyes.

“I sent the complaint just yesterday,” the magistrate admitted.

Joon took the teacup and threw at the magistrate’s face while he stood up in anger. The magistrate fell down and held his cheek while he cried out in pain, catching the attention of everyone, including Sam who was shocked at their host’s sudden violence.

“You bastard!” Joon roared. “How dare you do such a thing without my permission!”

The magistrate struggled to get off of his fat ass, but eventually he did while still cupping his bloody cheek. “That boy embarrassed me in my own trial! Personally, I don’t care what reasons you have for sheltering these white devils, but that boy should understand that there are consequences to those trying to be a hero for all wretches.”

“That was not your decision to make! And you dare interfere with my personal affairs?” Joon looked ready to give the magistrate a good beating.

The magistrate gulped in fear, but stood his ground. “You should be thankful, my lord. I will remove the white devil from your house and get to see the boy get his comeuppance. Even you can’t stop the investigator from doing what he will come to do.” Joon picked up the table and threw it over to the side, shattering the fine ceramic pots and cups in the process. “My lord, that was a
good tea set. I might have to ask you pay for them, around 200 silver taels I believe.”

Joon stepped forward and was very tempted to give the magistrate to punch the magistrate. However, he forced himself to calm down as he saw the onlookers in the courtyard witnessing the scene. He had to keep up appearances after all as the province’s governor.

“Perhaps you haven’t realized that it’s your word against mine,” Joon stated as he allowed his anger to flow out of him. “I wonder what the investigator might think if he sees that you can afford such nice tea sets and could have such luxurious decorations in your house.”

“What?” The magistrate stammered.

“You should know that the Chogo and Goi were at war for thousands of years and that it’s only natural that they would come to blows with each other,” Joon continued. “The investigator might not take too kindly on how you treated a woman, Chogo or not. And considering how often you surround yourself with dancers and other types of female company in your daily feasts, things are not looking too good for you, since someone of your position should be a shining example for the community to follow.”

The magistrate started to sweat profusely. “Sam,” Joon called out to him. “How much does he spend on his nightly feasts?”

“Each?” Sam wanted clarification, which Joon gave him. “From what I can recollect… 1000 silver taels a night.” Whispers erupted amongst the onlookers, whose dislike for their magistrate turned to hatred.

“The investigator will be very curious as to where you get the coin to pay for your feasts,” Joon turned to the magistrate, who grew paler. “So you see, you interfere with my affairs, I will ruin your life. You ever thought about that, you fool?”

The magistrate’s lips trembled as Joon walked back to Sam. “Are we done here, Lord Tarly?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sam replied as he and others begin to pack up their books.

“Good. We’re going back to Kushiro.”

As they returned to their host’s castle, Sam became more impressed at Joon. He had managed to retake the advantage over the magistrate after the onlookers witnessed his outburst and turned the magistrate’s threats around. It really hammered home to Sam as to why Lord Joon and the Kitara family were the ruling lords of the province, as opposed to other lords like Lord Hong.

Thinking back on the magistrate, Sam was shocked at how much he spent on his feasts. One thousand taels was more than enough to pay for good food, good drink, and the female company that Joon referred to. Now wonder he is so large in the middle, thought Sam. Which made him think on his own situation. While he ate much, he would never do so at the expense of others or to satiate an enormous craving. At the same time, that’s the assumption that his father made whenever he commented on his size. I’m not like the magistrate, but apparently appearances count.

More days passed as Sam thought on how he could differentiate himself from the magistrate. As they neared Kushiro, they passed by the fields under the personal control of the Kitara family. Much of the produce that came from these fields were wheat, millet, and soybeans, while the grasslands closer to Kushiro helped raise herds of cattle, horses, goats, sheep, pigs, and fowls. Rice couldn’t be grown this far north, with the wetter climates in the southern provinces being more
suitable for their cultivation, and Joon spent part of his annual income procuring many sacks of rice from the south each month. Still, the fields of the Kitara family allowed Joon, his wife, and his children to live comfortably and have coin in reserve.

Passing through the wheat field, Sam looked about before finding Jon. He had to get used to him wearing a straw conical hat, a simple tunic and trousers, and holding a sickle to cut through the wheat. *This is something to remember. Farmer Jon, secretly a Targaryen, toiling in the fields,* mused Sam.

Joon stopped his horse, as he looked at Jon. “You doing alright there, Daeron?”

Noticing Joon, Jon looked up, his conical hat failing to conceal his sweaty face and garments and how his face strained from the pain of toiling in the fields. “Doing alright here, my lord.”

“You must taste bitter for tasting sweet. And this is how most people have to live, so learn.”

“If that’s the case, why aren’t you in the fields with me?” Jon asked.

“I did my time and I became better for it,” Joon responded. “Time for you to do yours.” And Joon galloped forward, Kushiro not far away.

“I am tempted to help you, but as you can see,” Sam pointed to his large farm. “I’m not made for farming.”

Jon sighed. “It’s all right. I’ll see you tonight.” Sam bobbed his head before following Joon.

This was the new routine that Jon had followed for the past three moons. After waking up and having his morning meal, he would report to Hoon Ti for his combat training while he would spend the rest of the afternoon helping the Kitara family’s tenants cultivate their last few harvests before autumn and finally winter set in. After the afternoon was complete, Jon would return to Kushiro, eat his evening meal, and enter Lord Joon’s solar for private sessions before going to bed.

Jon initially had doubts on how farming could teach him how to be a better ruler, which is what Lord Joon had decided to do after seeing him and Meleys on his shoulder. Abbot Cao then told him before they left the monastery a few words.

“The gods have a plan for you, Daeron Targaryen,” the elderly abbot said of his encounter with the dragon being in the cave. “But as this being said, the gods do not help those who don’t help themselves. So before you can claim the mantle of responsibility that your ancestors took on, you must learn many things.”

“Such as?” Jon asked.

“First, you must learn to be humble. Too many times have people been ruled by those who took their own subjects for granted, and the results have been terrible. Never view yourselves as above them, but at the same time, don’t beg for their loyalty.” Jon nodded.

“Second, learn to be maneuver through the dangers of life, and there will be plenty of them in the years to come. There are many things that Joon could pass on to you, but also learn how to survive on your own. Yourself is sometimes the best teacher.” Jon was confused but nodded anyway.

“Finally, never assume that you can do everything by yourself. You might be the most gifted person in the world, but that means nothing without other people to help you. Take the time you
have now to make allies, develop your networks, find people who will be willing to help you. But also find those who will challenge you. Never take people who just say ‘yes.’”

Jon swallowed. “I will try to remember—”

“No, don’t say that,” the abbot shook his head. “You do or do not. There is no try in the maze of life.”

It was a long process for Jon to at least comprehend what the abbot was saying, and he doubted that he truly understood his words. However, with Meleys being born, he knew that he had to keep looking forward and start changing himself. It was the reason why Jon accepted Joon’s new daily routine for him without question.

With all the training Hoon Ti subjected him to and all of the blisters and pain in his muscles from the wheat farming, Jon would return home at night as if he was about to collapse. He barely could remain awake, as Joon would teach him the basics of strategy and tactics while making him read of the daily reports received of the happenings at court. When Jon was about to drift into sleep, Joon slammed the table.

“You’re wasting my time!” he barked. “You’re a Targaryen, but you must act like one.” What was more frustrating was that Joon stopped speaking to Jon in the common tongue, using only the three tongues alternatively.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Jon offered in guanhua.

“To offer no excuse is better than giving a bad one,” Joon replied coldly. “I will test you on this and I expect you to perform fully. Failure to do that will come with penalties. Understand?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then stop trying to sleep and pay attention.” Jon had to remember that their host had great knowledge of war and of court politics, so he needed to learn as much as he could and forced himself to stay awake.

This went on for three moons, but eventually, Jon’s mind and body got used to and adapted to the stresses of each day. One morning, Jon woke up and saw his reflection in their room’s polished metal. He had started to feel less tired and more able when he woke up, which perplexed him since he was constantly feeling sluggish. The results of it all were shocking to say the least.

Jon’s hair was the same as it had been, raven curls at shoulder length raven. But he had adopted a Yi-Tish topknot in order to make the training sessions with Hoon Ti and his afternoons in the fields easier for him to handle and only took it off when he went to bed. His beard was a little thicker but still neatly trimmed.

But what really shocked him was how much his body changed in the course of the past three moons when Joon decided to intensify his regime.

Jon noticed that he had grown slightly taller during their time in the empire, although Benjen still remained the tallest. His beard hid a sharp jawline that had taken shape during those past moons and his neck and shoulders looked firmer. His arms looked leaner and more built than before, which must’ve been the result of the hard training and strenuous work in the wheat fields alongside the different food in Yi-Ti.

Gliding his hand along his torso, Jon felt his chest and abdominals become even denser, as whatever fat that he had must’ve been burnt away through the past moons. The same could be said
of his legs, which looked thinner but was also firm.

But just as important, he saw that his eyes had a different focus to them and his face spoke determination. It was a far cry from how he lived at Winterfell from long ago, if that was what it felt like.

Jon had become more toned and more focused in the last three moons, something that he didn’t know was possible when he first came to these shores. *Very interesting*, Jon noted.

Besides Benjen and Sam, Jon wasn’t the only one who had begun to appreciate how his hard work altered his appearance, if the looks he would get in Kushiro were anything to go by.

Jon might have taken his looks more into stride as he started to shed his bastard mind away, but he was still occupied with his usual brooding. But while the servant girls and Lord Joon’s daughters were nervous around him when he first came to Kushiro, they started to have a hard time resisting stealing glances at him whenever he walked by. They initially feared him when Jon returned with Meleys, as Meleys was kept in the kennels and fed regularly while being allowed to fly around the castle, the household began to tolerate her presence when she didn’t threaten them with dragonfire.

Deciding to take the first step, Jon began to respond to whenever the servant girls giggled around him. Mustering his best guanhua, he would compliment their hair or their eyes before moving on, not noticing how they were in shock at the simple fact that he talked to them.

For Komo and Karasa, Jon had to be more careful. Even though Jon could see that they were pretty, Joon might not react well if he approached them as he did with the servant girls. So, he kept his distance and only approached them if they asked for help such as their calligraphy or getting certain objects for them. Jon wasn’t naïve, but he decided to indulge them.

But that was not enough, as Lord Joon pulled him aside and scolded him. “I want you to spend more time training, not being near my daughters.”

“I apologize for any misunderstandings—”

“Don’t apologize. Just do it. For each time you talk to them inappropriately, I will deduct ten taels from your stipend. Clear?”

Jon sighed as he rubbed his head. “Yes.”

As for Chanhee, she asked Lord Joon if she could earn her keep by working in the fields with Jon, which he agreed to. But as Jon toiled away with the sickle, he noticed Chanhee steal glances at him from behind. While she did so before, it became more common. Ghost watched the entire thing and licked Jon’s hand afterwards, but he knew that his direwolf was teasing him about Chanhee.

Jon was not one to admit any sign of affection, but he had to admit that he had grown… rather fond of Chanhee. They started to talk more often in the grasslands around Kushiro and really enjoy each other’s company. He didn’t know if he felt any hint of love, whatever that was to him, regarding Chanhee, but he did feel a connection with the Chogo woman.

As Jon and Chanhee sat on the dirt during their break from the fields, with Ghost by his side, Chanhee inquired about the dragon. “So it’s true? You come from dragons?”

Jon exhaled. “Yes. That’s true.”

Chanhee nodded. “So… you’re not going to be here forever.”
Jon could see a hint of sadness in her voice. “Eventually, I have to go home.”

Chanhee cleared her throat. “I know. But it’s just that… if you do, I’m going to miss you.”

Jon turned to look at her. “I will miss you too.”

Suddenly, Chanhee pulled him in for a quick peck on his lips. Jon was shocked.

“I’m sorry,” Chanhee said as she stood up. “I need to go.”

Jon grabbed her arm. “Chanhee, what’s wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have,” she shook her head. “I’m a Chogo woman and you’re a white devil. It won’t work.”

“What won’t work?”

“Any union between us, marriage, children, all of it,” Chanhee was on the verge of tears. “I should have known better. But knowing that just makes it hurt.”

“Slow down, Chanhee. You’re thinking too far,” Jon tried to calm her down.

“You’re the first person to respect me and the first man that I can have something with. But we’re worlds apart. It will never work,” she tried to reason with him.

“Chanhee, I like what we have right now,” he tried to reassure her. “Regarding that other stuff, we can talk it over later.”

“No, I must stop it before it becomes too strong,” Chanhee brushed him off, but he could tell that it was painful for her to do so. “I will see you back at Kushiro,” she said before sitting at another place and not talking to him.

Jon was surprised at how Chanhee acted. The whole thing was confusing for him and it all happened too quickly for him to really think about it. But he wasn’t going to let his bond with Chanhee be so abruptly ended.

It also made things more conflicted for Jon. He had something with Chanhee, but he also had something with his aunt, Daenerys. He couldn’t tell if he did feel strong affections for her, but she was family and there was nothing in the world that Jon wouldn’t give in order to help her. We’re the only ones left. It’s no surprise that we have a connection.

However, Jon only met his aunt through those visions and he could actually see Chanhee. It was as if his heart was being drawn to two places at once. Gods, why must I feel this now, when I must be focused on becoming more of a Targaryen?

But such thoughts had to be set aside as Jon returned to Kushiro and ate evening meals. Immediately, the family, Sam, and Benjen noticed the awkwardness between he and Chanhee, which prompted small smiles from Komo and Karasa. Sam and Benjen were more sympathetic, as they both knew who she was to him. But Jon willed himself to focus on his meal and his upcoming evening session with Lord Joon.

After their meal was done, which consisted of a bowl of rice, eggs and beef fried on a stone surface, and baechi, Jon showed up to Lord Joon’s solar. Sitting down in front of their host, he picked up the text that all army officers had to study and memorize by heart. That evening, he and Lord Joon were going over what that famed general said about spies:
Thus, what enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.

Now this foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits. It cannot be obtained inductively from experience, nor by any deductive calculation.

Knowledge of the enemy's dispositions can only be obtained from other men.

Hence the use of spies, of whom there are five classes: Local spies, inward spies, converted spies, doomed spies, and surviving spies.

When these five kinds of spy are all at work, none can discover the secret system. This is called "divine manipulation of the threads." It is the sovereign's most precious faculty.

Having local spies means employing the services of the inhabitants of a district.

Having inward spies, making use of officials of the enemy.

Having converted spies, getting hold of the enemy's spies and using them for our own purposes.

Having doomed spies, doing certain things openly for purposes of deception, and allowing our spies to know of them and report them to the enemy.

Surviving, finally, are those who bring back news from the enemy's camp.

"Now, from those words alone, which do you think is the most important type of spy?" Joon asked in nihongo.

Jon mustered up his best nihongo. "He says that all of them are important."

"Elaborate."

"Well, all of them serve different purposes, but they are as crucial to getting foreknowledge as the other," Jon explained. "We need local spies because they can give us the lay of the land. We need inward spies because we have to have an understanding of what the enemy is thinking and planning at the top level. We need converted spies since the enemy still thinks they’re spying for them, and thus we can damage their networks in the long term. Doomed spies are a bit tricky, but they’re important because they create the illusion that the enemy is successfully getting from us while we know what to pass on to them. As for surviving spies, they’re the ones we send out for short missions like rangings and get information on the enemy quickly."

Joon nodded in approval. "Very good. But judging from what you’ve just read, which is the most difficult to accomplish?"

"If I had to pick, possibly the doomed spies."

"Why?"

"It’s difficult to deceive someone, but more so when you deceive them and not act naturally. Sometimes, the best way to respond in that situation is not to respond, although I must admit that I am still having some difficulty understanding that," Jon admitted.

"Lies are hard to accomplish by even the most effective manipulators. But the best lies are rooted in the truth. When the truth and lies become confused with each other, that’s when you know that the person will very likely be persuaded,” Joon explained.
Jon exhaled. “I don’t know if I can be effective at lying.”

“Whether with military men or at court, people don’t say what they mean all the time. And that’s when you have to put yourself in their boots. What do they want to protect so much that they will resort to lying and deception? That’s the question you want to answer,” Joon outlined.

Before Jon could answer back, they felt a knock on the screen door. “Who is it?” Joon switched back to guanhua.

“Husband.” Hearing his wife’s voice, Joon gestured for Jon to open it. Making way for Lady Myung, she handed him a red envelope with golden characters.

Joon’s eyes widened at that envelope. The shock was evident on his face, as he snatched the envelope, opened it, and read the contents. Jon kept looking at Joon as he went out of the solar, leaving Myung and Jon.

“What is that letter?” Jon asked Lady Myung.

“Red and gold means that it’s from the emperor himself,” she explained. Jon stared back at the envelope.

“And that usually means something bad has happened?”

“Most likely,” Lady Myung nodded.

Jon picked up the letter and gave it to Lady Myung, who translated the distinct court dialect that he didn’t understand.

“To the Governor of the Northwest Province,

The emperor’s son, the Crown Prince Simung Bu, was tasked with the subjugation and incorporation into the empire a confederation of Jogos Nhai tribes that have started to resist our rule. One hundred thousand troops from the southern provinces were provided to the Crown Prince and victory was certain. However, either by the will of the gods or incompetence among the officers of the Crown Prince’s troops, they were wiped out and the Crown Prince has been captured by the Jogos Nhai.

The Crown Prince must be recovered at all costs, but we shall not resort to negotiation. Therefore, by the power invested in me by the emperor, I order you to assemble all available troops and recall all former soldiers back to active duty. You will work in concert with the Northeast Province and the select troops from the Five Forts to recover him by force. Once all forces have been mobilized, await further instructions.

The situation for the empire has never been more uncertain, so we must act accordingly to ensure that thousands of years of our dynasty will not end ignobly.

Ten thousand years to His Augustness and the azure dynasty! Long live the emperor!

Signed,

Hudam Shu

Prime Minister of the Golden Empire

Jon was stunned. One hundred thousand men wiped out and the crown prince captured? That
would explain why Joon rushed out of the solar so quickly.

Just then, he returned to the solar. “Daeron, we’re leaving in the morning.”

“What’s going on?”

“I assume you have read the letter.” Jon nodded. “I’m giving you your Valyrian steel swords. Ready yourself, for tomorrow we prepare for battle.” And Joon left again.

Jon was shocked once more, but it quickly faded as he told Benjen what was going on and he too prepared. As one of Joon’s brigade commanders, he would most certainly see battle.

The next morning, Jon and Benjen rode out with Lord Joon to headquarters while Sam helped write the messages to be sent to all over the province. As for Chanhee, she wanted to come, only for Joon to refuse. However, Jon asked him, “She might know where the Jogos Nhai might be located in the steppes.”

“I do, my lord,” Chanhee nodded. “The Chogo have fought them for thousands of years, but we know where each other is located at all time. I can help you.”

Joon blustered in frustration before saying, “Get a horse. Quickly!”

The four went out of the castle towards headquarters, while Jon and Chanhee were still tense after their argument. However, he had to prepare himself.

*Only over a year and now I’m seeing battle? I pray to the gods that they protect me,* Jon hoped as headquarters came into view.

Chapter End Notes

A lot to cover in this chapter, including more knowledge about Yi-Ti itself.

Jon is becoming more confident in himself, but we have our first conflict between him and Chanhee. And just to clarify, he might have seen Dany, but they don't have romantic feelings for each other yet. That comes later. For now, Jon is having that Ygritte bond with Chanhee, but it's more equal and more, dare I say, sweeter than in canon.

And now, we have our next major event in the Yi-Ti besides Meleys' birth, and this will kick the plot forward. Stay tuned!
Chaos and Separation

Chapter Notes

A lot to cover in this chapter, and every detail adds up. So bear with me please.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chaos and Separation

Benjen sat in the main chamber of the Northwest Army’s headquarters, where Lord Joon convened his brigade commanders, the commanders of the infantry and cavalry, and the administration officers. Quartermaster Shin and Adjutant Dae sat closest to their Captain-General, with the other administrators and senior commanders close by. Benjen sat in the middle amongst the other brigade commanders while he left Lieutenant Lim in charge of preparing the “flying column” to march at a moment’s notice.

But the commanders and administrators all sat opposite of each other, with one half facing the other, while Lord Joon occupied the prominent position at the top, front, and center. That way, all could hear their captain-general and look at each other as they discussed their options regarding the emperor’s commands, or more accurately, those of the prime minister’s. Who really rules here? Not even the Hand of the King could have so much authority.

“Thank you all for coming at such short notice,” Joon began in nihongo. “I trust all of you are aware of why we’re gathered here.” Benjen and the officers presented nodded their heads. “In the last few days, I was able to obtain an accurate appraisal of the current situation. His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince,” all of them dipped their heads in respect at the mention of his name, which Benjen quickly did but still perplexing him at such a gesture. “Was placed in command of one hundred thousand men, all of them drawn from the southern provinces and from the capital garrison, with the task of subjugating a confederation of Jogos Nhai that have begun to strike at our Goi allies at alarming rates while making incursions into the Northeast Province. Quartermaster Shin,” he turned to him. “Enlighten us all on what exactly is happening.”

“Yes, general,” Shin affirmed before turning his head to the rest of those assembled. “My sources have indicated that there we are not dealing with a united people in the Jogos Nhai. The actions of the ones we face are in fact the work of a renegade group of jhats that have grown dissatisfied with the terms of the treaty between the other tribes and our empire. But there is a clear geographical origin in regards to these jhats.”

“Explain,” Joon urged him.

“From what I was able to obtain, these jhats are concentrated on land near the Northeast Province. The reports that I got from my counterpart there all said that there had been increased disturbances between imperial patrols and tribesmen affiliated with these jhats, the latter of whom say that they need to move south since their moonsingers have warned of a winter that would last for generations, which would freeze the plains and kill off their herds. However, the Northeast governor denied their request to settle past the border, since that would encourage more tribes to do so and thus strain the supply lines for the Five Forts,” Shin elaborated.

“And we cannot allow the Five Forts to wither, since that would expose our northern frontier to the
dangers from the Grey Waste. We can reason with the Jogos Nhai, but the same cannot be said of the raiders and other threats from that desert,” Adjutant Dae added. “So far, most of the messages from the jhats that I have received all deny being involved in their people violating the truce, which lend credence to the idea that we’re facing renegades. However, those jhats have managed to crush one of our armies and capture the Crown Prince. We can only guess what their price will be before they return him to the empire.”

“Which is why the prime minister said that we will not negotiate,” Joon asserted before turning to Feng Jo, Lieutenant-General of the Horse in the Northwest. “General Jo, will our cavalry be able to contend with those assembled by those jhats?”

“We might not be as fast as they could, given that they sleep on their horses,” Jo quipped, prompting chuckles from the officers but were quieted at Joon’s stern face. “However, we can last longer in a sustained battle given our weapons, armor, and training.”

“Take care not to be so overconfident in our abilities,” Joon warned him. “These men have experience in how we conduct ourselves in the field and once we’re in the steppes, there is no guarantee that our supply lines will be maintained over the distances. We must also be as fast as our enemy, so make sure that the cavalrymen only take their weapons and light armor. Anything else could be kept back here.”

“Yes, general,” Feng Jo affirmed.

Joon then turned to Sone Taruhito, Lieutenant-General of the Foot in the Northwest. “The same goes for you, General Taruhito. We must move quickly in the steppes and our infantry must be able to react at a moment’s notice to ambushes, quick maneuvers, and the like. Do not bring any heavy weapons.”

“Understood, general,” he said.

Joon looked to Captain Akhito Han, the commander of the missile troops and the newest arrival to the Northwest Army from the capital garrison itself. “Captain Han, I know that it’s only been three moons since you’ve arrived here. Have you any battle experience?”

“No, general,” Captain Han admitted. Benjen could feel Joon’s frustration when he rubbed his forehead. There’s nothing worse for a commander than dealing with one who doesn’t know how to handle combat. It was even more worrisome since Captain Han was in charge of the missile troops, the ones who had the most education of the troops and handled the black power weapons among others.

“Captain, we’re about to embark on an expedition that will determine the course of our empire, and I need every one of my men to perform to the best of his abilities. You haven’t seen battle, but I must know if you can do the rigors of combat. If not, then resign from your post and let someone else take command,” Joon gave his ultimatum.

Captain Han gulped. “I… shall do my duties as best as possible,” he stammered slightly.

“I hope so,” Joon narrowed an eye at him before looking at the imperial commissioner for the Northwest Army. “Commissioner, the prime minister ordered that all former soldiers were recalled to active duty. How many were we able to obtain?”

“Fifteen thousand, general.” Even though the commissioner was appointed as the emperor’s representative, he still was subordinate to Joon.
“And have all of our auxiliaries been assembled?”

“Yes, general.”

“How many?”

“Thirty thousand.”

Benjen had studied on the purposes of the auxiliaries. Drawn from all able-bodied men in the province who did not serve in the army or had completed their enlistments, their main purpose was not to participate in active combat. Their main responsibilities included wall and road repair, river dike building, bridge construction, and transportation of supplies by boat or mule. That way, the active soldiers could focus on fighting the enemy without having to worry about the other affairs.

As for the former soldiers, they too would not participate in combat. Despite their experience, much can happen when they set aside the uniform and engage in pursuits unrelated to soldiery, all of which can deteriorate a man’s physical condition. It was especially true for those that had served twenty years, since they were not young men anymore. So the army decided that they would be better utilized in the rearguard or in local communities where they could maintain security while the troops were engaged elsewhere. Only in dire circumstances would the auxiliaries or the former soldiers be put in battle.

Benjen saw that arrangement as very efficient, as that meant that the province and the empire could maximize the amount of power under their control in times of crisis. Moreover, he became more impressed at how quickly they were able to mobilize, as the process took only days. When a lord paramount called the banners in Westeros, the process would take weeks, a moon at the most. The latter certainly applied for the north. *How did they manage to do that?*

“All right,” Joon clapped his knees. “So, we have sixty thousand soldiers under our command plus forty-five thousand more. Quartermaster, how many can the Northeast Province bring forth?”

“Roughly the same number, general,” Shin replied.

“Adjutant, just how many men are the Five Forts providing for this expedition?”

“Ten thousand,” Adjutant Dae answered. “Two thousand from each. They’ll likely be the vanguard, considering their experience with austere conditions.”

“Good,” Joon nodded. “General Jo and General Taruhito, get your troops ready. Do not take any unnecessary equipment and ensure that they can travel light.”

“*Yes, general,*” they both nodded.

“Quartermaster, make sure that there is enough food, water, and hay to last us for at least three moons on the steppes. We don’t want to compete with Jogos Nhai for pastures. Also, make sure that your sources and scouts are up to date with the latest movements of these renegade jhats.”

“Understood, general.”

“Adjutant, ensure that all papers and maps are accounted for. We must make sure that we have the right forms to communicate with the Northeast Governor and whoever commands the contingent from the Five Forts. Burn any maps that are out of date and work with the quartermaster to ensure that we have the correct ones.”

Adjutant Dae shifted uncomfortably at the notion of working with him, but sucked it up. “It will be
“Brigade commanders, await your orders from your respective generals and prepare your brigade to march when we receive word. Captain Stark,” Joon finally addressed Benjen. “I trust these last six moons have been productive for you.”

Benjen felt the other brigade commanders, senior officers, and administrators all turn their eyes on him. Breathing in and out to control his anxiousness, he found the words to say. “General Kitara, over these six moons, I have developed a working relationship with the officers and soldiers under my command. They can march in proper formation, maintain their weapons and armor, and have been trained to react to any instance in battle, including ambushes.”

“You’ve been ambushed many times at your Wall?”

“Yes, general. The wildlings are a fearsome foe and I have learned much from my engagements with them. I passed on as much as I could with them.”

“I hope they perform well, for your sake,” Joon had to maintain distance between themselves in front of the other officers, as how they interacted with each other here and at Kushiro had to be separated. However, given that the “flying column” would be part of the advance guard of the army, it was important for Joon to know that Benjen brought them back to full battle condition.

“As your men will march ahead of us, Captain Stark, you will work with Quartermaster Shin to procure any knew intelligence that you come across. Also, your duties will be to conduct denial of the land.”

Benjen’s eyes widened. “Denial of the land” meant that they would be responsible for burning vast swaths of the enemy’s pastures in order to starve them out. “Will that work with people who move on fast mounts?”

“Burn whatever grasses their zorses can feed on, they’ll start making mistakes and we’ll slowly smoke them out,” Joon explained. “Our orders from the prime minister are clear, so we must execute them. Understood, Captain Stark?”

Despite his reservations, Benjen knew that he couldn’t openly disagree with their host. “Yes, general.”

“Good,” Joon stood up, as did the other officers. “The final orders will come in the morning, so prepare the troops and get some rest. Dismissed.”

The officers poured out of the main chamber, while some didn’t bother to be courteous to Benjen as they shoved past him.

“Captain Stark, a word please,” Benjen turned around and saw Quartermaster Shin standing near the entrance of the chamber.

“Yes, quartermaster?” Benjen walked up to him.

“It appears that we’ll be working together in this expedition,” Shin noted.

“So it would seem.”

“The general might have allowed you to stay in his home and given you a command, but remember this: I outrank you and you will follow my commands,” Shin got right to the point. “I highly doubt you got the troops back in shape, considering how addicted they were to the yapian.”
“Well, paying them their due coin did much to improve my position to them,” Benjen said.

“Yes, but will that be enough?” Shin asked pointedly. “A white devil like yourself leading those wretches into battle. For all the efforts that you say you put into them, I doubt it will be enough.”

“I’m confused as to why you have a low opinion of them, quartermaster. After all, many of them were farmers, just like you were,” Benjen indicated.

“If you think that fact should make me have some kind of affinity for them, you are mistaken. Even in the same category, there are differences and I just happened to be above many of them.”

Benjen scoffed. “It seems you are just as capable of acting like the hightborns that you disdain so much. I know what you said to Lord Tarly and let me tell you. Just because of a few bad examples doesn’t give you the right to look down all highborns as schemers.”

“And you would know? You’re a hightborn yourself, so do you think that you have an understanding of how other people live?”

“I know what it is like to struggle, especially in winter. I know what it is to be hungry, so don’t tell me that me being born to a lord makes me blind to what goes on in the world.”

“Now that you mention it, I made some inquiries and read some books on your house. ‘Winter is coming?’ I never heard bigger horseshit in my life.”

That got Benjen’s attention. “What did you say?”

“So your house only prepares for one season of hardship? That just proves that you truly don’t understand how those without titles and lands have to endure hardship everyday.”

“You misunderstand those words,” Benjen felt the wolf in him emerge at this man daring to affront his house. “Our sigil is the direwolf. The Starks have had to endure the cold of the north for thousands of years, and our struggles became worse whenever winter came. ‘When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.’ When winter comes, the Starks band together to survive. That’s what you failed to comprehend when you did your inquiring.”

“But you live in a keep, and have lands. I might have been above the other farmers, but I had to struggle in the real world, where the hardships don’t increase with the seasons. Be it summer or winter, I had to endure hunger and bad harvests. But through sheer determination, I was able to pass the examinations and become a high-ranking officer of the army. I doubt you would be able to accomplish that if our places were switched,” Shin spat back.

Benjen shook his head. “Don’t assume that our lives are easy just because we have those things. Each station has their own dangers and the Starks had to fight for their right to live for thousands of years. If you read your books properly, you would know that the Starks had fought off threats for their whole existence. So believe me, I understand struggle.”

Shin still remained unconvinced, causing Benjen headaches for when they do have to work together as Lord Joon commanded. “To assuage any more doubts you have, let me say this. If our positions were switched, I would have surpassed what you accomplished.”

Shin blinked. “What?”

“A man gets what he earns, something you should understand. I don’t know how much you know of the Night’s Watch, but I didn’t have to be there. My eldest brother was dead, my remaining
brother taking up our family’s lordship, and I could have stayed at Winterfell while finding a proper highborn lady to marry and further secure the Starks. But I chose to be at the Wall and I worked my way up to become the First Ranger. Despite my family’s standing, I chose to endure the cold and I got what I earned. So, how about you spare me your self-righteous bullshit for someone? From what I can tell, you thinking yourself better than your farming brethren makes you just as bad as the worst highborn,” Benjen laid it for him.

There was a pause as Shin narrowed his eyes in indignation at Benjen. If he was affected by Benjen’s words, he hid it well. After all, he was the quartermaster for the Northwest Army, so he had to have learned how to control his emotions. Well, he didn’t control his emotions just moments ago.

Not willing to let Benjen have the last word, Shin chuckled in amusement. “What’s so funny, quartermaster?”

“I noticed that you didn’t say why you went to your ice wall in the first place. You have to either be crazy to do that, or something else influenced your decision,” Shin said.

“And what would that be?”

“Guilt.” Benjen felt his heart stop at what Shin just uttered. But before he could have him explain further, the quartermaster turned to his area of headquarters to conduct his duties.

The only two people who knew the true reason as to why Benjen went to the Wall in the first place were Ned and Howland Reed, both of whom were at the Tower of Joy. He never believed for a moment that Rhaegar kidnapped Lyanna, considering that he knew that his sister was the Knight of the Laughing Tree and saw how she acted around Rhaegar at Harrenhal. But the guilt part came after Benjen had covered for Lyanna when she decided to secretly meet the Prince of Dragonstone.

“Lyanna, I don’t know if you should do this. I want to support you, but there might be consequences of you meeting Prince Rhaegar.”

Lyanna put her hand on his cheek and smiled. “Don’t worry, Benjen. I will send letters in case anyone is asking, and Elia will also send her letters. But please, don’t tell Brandon and father what I’m doing. It’ll cause more complications.”

Benjen sighed, knowing that he couldn’t stop her. “Just came back to us safe, okay?”

Lyanna mounted her mare as she grinned at her young brother. “Hey, it’s me.” And that was the last time Benjen saw her alive.

He couldn’t face Ned after that and seeing her body at Winterfell. But fortunately for him, his older brother had his own burden to bear, mainly his promise to their sister. Pat of the reason why Ned took Jon in despite the damage that it would cause and the promise was because he too felt guilty for not seeing things clearly. So, both had their own guilt to bear.

But with the changed circumstances, Benjen began to see a new purpose for himself in Yi-Ti. He saw his nephew become surer of himself and he was leading actual soldiers into battle. It was as if the gods wanted to wipe his guilt away, knowing the negative effects it had on one’s mind. If only you could see him now, Lyanna, Benjen thought wistfully. However, it was too soon for him to celebrate, as Jon still had a long way to go.

He then returned to his camp, where all of the troops stood at the ready. Following his instructions, they all wore only light armor and carried only what was necessary. The footmen held their pikes
tightly, the cavalrymen were currently dismounted but were all armed with their daos and daggers, and the missile troops had prepared enough black powder and their weapons to be carried on carriages.

Benjen then found Lieutenant Lim, who was directing the other officers in his stead. “Captain Stark. Are we to march?”

“We’ll get further orders in the morning, lieutenant,” Benjen dismounted his horse. “How are they doing?”

“The men are just eager to see battle,” Lim said. “Nothing more effective to raise men’s spirits than for them to kill the enemy.

“Indeed,” Benjen agreed. For the rangers at the Wall, their morale lifted whenever they fought and triumphed against bands of wildlings. “I just hope that the last moons retraining them have paid off.”

“We’ll see, captain,” Lim answered. Benjen saw that the officers were being active in seeing their soldiers in good condition, quite the progression given what they couldn’t care less only three moons ago. Seeing their brigade commander share in their training hardships certainly helped, as the troops heeded his every word and action.

And now, his methods would be put to the test, as they would enter battle for the first time in a while.

Benjen waited with Lieutenant Lim in the main tent, unable to sleep as they anticipated the command. He had killed men before, but he had never been this nervous in years. *Maybe it’s because these troops have been under my care.* While he couldn’t say that there was a sense of brotherhood in the brigade, there was a closer bond between the leaders and the followers than before Benjen arrived. *And now, I will have to see some of them die. I cannot avoid that, but that’s an outcome I wish to avoid regardless.*

As morning came and Benjen remained awake, a messenger came. “Captain Stark,” he addressed him. “From headquarters.”

Benjen took the letter, which had Lord Joon’s seal, and opened it. Reading the contents, he prepared himself and turned to Lieutenant Lim. “It’s time.”

“Yes, captain,” Lieutenant Lim ran out of the tent as he relayed the orders to the troops to assemble into formation. A servant put on his armor and tied his sword to his waist before Benjen emerged from the tent. Looking upon the neat formations his troops were arranged in, he eyed each soldier and officer as he passed them by before he mounted his horse, with Lieutenant Lim joining him.

“Brigade, fall in!” Lieutenant Lim shouted. The cavalry formed up directly behind Benjen and the lieutenant, with the infantry not far behind them. Getting the nod from his commander, the lieutenant tightened his grip on his horse’s reins. “Forward, march!”

Benjen and his horse led the brigade in the front as they advanced to the main force of the Northwest Army. Briefly, he looked at Lord Joon and smiled at Jon, who with Chanhee and Ghost was directly their host and his direct subordinates. But as they were the flying column, they had to go ahead of the main army. Sparing one last look at Jon, Benjen and the brigade quickened their pace and were soon in the middle of the empty plains to the far north.

*Give this place snow and more trees and you have the lands beyond the Wall,* Benjen silently
remarked as they became alert in the new environment around them.

Jon rode alongside Ghost and Chanhee as they trailed behind Lord Joon and his entourage. He had strapped Longclaw to his back while Dark Sister was tied to his waist. Chanhee didn’t carry any weapons, mostly because Joon didn’t want to further complicate matters with General Jo, the commander of the cavalry, and the Goi cavalrymen who had accompanied them on this expedition by arming a Chogo woman. I will make sure that she doesn’t get hurt, Jon promised himself.

He began to realize that he was entering battle for the first time in his life, but he wasn’t feeling anything glorious from it already. He still had much to learn from Lord Joon and he felt that he was not ready to fight on his own with Hoon Ti to guide him. However, he couldn’t protest Joon’s orders to have him accompany the army and obeyed them. He also didn’t look forward to when he would have to kill, as he already felt that this experience would be scarring for him.

He looked to Chanhee, who started to become more comfortable as they journeyed further into the steppes. “You forget, this is my home,” she said after noticing his looks. “I’ve been riding around these plains my entire life, but I couldn’t fully enjoy it as our people had to fight the Goi and the Jogos Nhai at the same time.”

“Will your people be around this area?” Jon asked.

“Hopefully,” Chanhee answered. “It’s been half a year since I’ve seen them, and they must think I am lost.”

“Then why didn’t you try to return to them?”

Chanhee hesitated. “You think that it’s simple. I can’t just show up to my tribe and say, ‘Hello. I’ve been alive this whole time.’ Plus, I struck an imperial officer, even though he was a Goi bastard. To do that is a death sentence, which is what I would have gone through if it weren’t for you.”

“It must be hard, being separated from those you associate with home,” Jon could certainly understand.

Chanhee sighed. “It is. But I guess my time in Kushiro has taught me much. So, I cannot really complain.”

Now that they were talking about Kushiro, Jon had to ask. “Chanhee, about the last time we talked in the wheat fields—”

“What about it?”

“I know that there are difficulties between us, mainly because I am a white devil and you are a woman of the steppes. I don’t know much about women myself, but I won’t force you to do anything. If you want to have some space for yourself, all right. But I only ask that you don’t push me away. I like what we have and I don’t want for it to end,” Jon said his piece.

Chanhee looked at him, but her gaze softened. “I appreciate you saying that. But remember this. I haven’t learned to settle down anywhere because that’s not how I was raised. Because of that, I don’t know how to develop companionships. If that’s a problem for you, just let me know. I won’t judge you for it.”

Jon shook his head. “I just told you. I like what we have. We can just take it one step at a time and see where it goes from there. No need to make rash decisions.”
Chanhee smiled at that, causing Jon to also smile. “So… tell me about how you met Ghost.”

Jon eagerly took the opportunity to make more conversation with Chanhee and told him of how he, Robb, Bran, Ned, the Cassels, and Theon found the direwolf litter. Theon had called Ghost “the runt of the litter” in reference to his supposed bastard status. *If I could see his face of when he realizes how wrong he was,* Jon mused. He also told Chanhee of why Ghost was named “Ghost.”

“And what of your dragon, Meleys? Why did you name her that?” Chanhee became curious.

“That’s a long story, Chanhee,” Jon said.

“Not like we have anything better to do than just watch more grass growing from horseback,” Chanhee gestured to the endless plains around them.

Jon told her first about Alyssa Targaryen, sister-wife of Baelon Targaryen, and then Rhaenys the Queen Who Never Was, the two main riders of Meleys the Red Queen. As he was slowly coming to terms with his Targaryen heritage, many of the events that occurred during their reign in power began to affect him, including the Dance of the Dragons. He couldn’t imagine himself killing his own sister or nephew, as had Aegon did with Rhaenyra and Daemon with Aemond, since he imagined Arya or any of his Stark cousins in that position.

“You don’t have to continue if it’s too hard,” Chanhee said after sensing his growing hesitation as he spoke further on the Dance.

“No,” Jon wanted to push on. “It’s important, no matter how much it affects me.” Taking a breath, he talked about what had happened at Rook’s Rest, where Rhaenys and Meleys were able to inflict severe wounds on Aegon and Sunfyre but were killed themselves by Aemond and Vhagar.

“That doesn’t seem like a very good story behind the first Meleys,” she spoke after Jon finished his explanation.

“It’s not,” Jon concurred. “But that’s why I decided to name my dragon that. I want to believe that Meleys, and whoever rode her, were meant for great things, which would have come to pass if it weren’t for the Dance. This is me having Meleys a second chance at greatness, but I will make sure that she lives for centuries, as it should have been.”

“It hasn’t been long since you discovered where you truly come from and you already have a connection to a family you don’t know very well. That’s remarkable,” Chanhee observed.

“Maybe because the stain of being a bastard is slowly being swept away from me,” he answered. “I am not as stifled as I once felt.”

“However, you shouldn’t let it get to your head,” she said quickly. “The last thing I want is to see you become another arrogant ass. You might have a big wolf and a dragon, but you’re still nothing in these lands. Remember that.”

“You’re the second person to tell me that,” Jon gave a light laugh. “I had to understand that I had to go thousands of miles before nobody truly cares about me. But I think there is some comfort in being among those that don’t care. No expectations, no one having any notions of who I am supposed to be, and all that.”

“Now you know what it’s like to live our lives,” Chanhee cracked another smile. “We’re free and there’s nobody to make us live any differently.”

Jon let out a breath in pensiveness. “I sometimes wish that.”
“Well, you can starting right now,” she lightly punched his arm. “Before you have to go back.”

Jon looked at her with appreciation. “Thank you, Chanhee.”

That night, the army made camp and Jon was allowed to pitch his tent near Joon’s, since he was acting as his personal bodyguard. The same couldn’t be said for Chanhee, since she was considered “army baggage” despite Joon allowing her to come due to her knowledge of the terrain. Jon had Ghost watch over her in case anyone tried to act foolishly with her, knowing that his direwolf’s size would be enough to deter those.

Unlike the first meeting, Jon was allowed in the commanders’ meeting in Joon’s tent, which included all of the brigade commanders save for Benjen, who was far ahead of the main army and had to conduct scouting with his flying column. However, he had to stand behind Joon instead of sitting, not that he cared in the slightest.

“Captain Stark’s cavalry has reported signs of the enemy east of the Shrinking Sea,” Quartermaster Shin pointed on the map. “I have also been in contact with a few of the fort captains who are posted between here and the Five Forts. Their small garrisons will not be enough to withstand any onslaught by the renegade jhats.”

“How many are we facing?” Joon asked.

“If Captain Stark’s men and the forts are correct, we are facing thirty thousand renegades on zorseback.”

“Thirty thousand? And they defeated an army of one hundred thousand?” exclaimed one of the foot brigade commanders.

“We are dealing with men who know the land well and can utilize their zorses to their full potential,” Joon said. “It’s possible that they were able to lure the crown prince into favorable positions where their fast cavalry can overwhelm ours. Therefore, we must be careful not to underestimate them. Any new from Trader Town?”

“So far, the garrison commander reports that all is quiet there,” Shin answered. “The problem is with the jhats in the southeast of the plains, who are all involved in the annihilation of our army. They can skirt past our forts in the northeast frontier and thus use our roads against us.”

“And if that happens, chaos will erupt in all of the northern provinces,” General Taruhito said. “If I may, general, it’s best that we march to the forts with all possible haste. Once we buttress their defenses, we can more effectively defend against their advance.”

“But they can get through the gaps, which there certainly will be,” General Jo pointed out on the map. “We must adopt a more mobile approach to the threat. We send out cavalry patrols and keep our infantry in reserve so they can be deployed wherever needed.”

“For that to be employed successfully, we would need to have information on where they actually are,” Adjutant Dae said. “Sending scouts out is a risk in itself, since they could overwhelmed by the faster Jogos Nhai. We cannot afford to make the same mistake as the crown prince did.”

As they debated their options, Jon looked at the map and looked at all of the roads outlined, the forts, and the plains east of the Shivering Sea. It was certainly a wide area in which the enemy could maneuver, making the task of exactly locating them all the more difficult since that area of the plains had no roads.

But then, Jon noticed one of the forts on the map. “My lord,” he addressed Joon in nihongo. “May I
say something?”

The officers all eyed the white devil in the tent. “What is it you want to say, Daeron?” Joon asked.

“What is the fort called?” Jon put his finger one of them drawn on the map.

“That’s called Daeya Fort, boy,” General Jo said.

Jon ignored his rudeness. “Do you see how close Daeya Fort is to this crossroad here?” He pointed to another place on the map.

“That’s only fifty miles from that crossroads,” Joon said, and then it hit him. “You think it’s possible that the jhats would attack that fort in order to get to the crossroads?”

“From what I know, my lord,” Jon started. “This crossroad leads to different paths that connect to the entire Northeast Province. This town seems to have no fortifications or a strong garrison, meaning that they rely on that fort for most of its protection.”

“General, why is this white devil allowed to speak?” one of the brigade commanders asked incredulously.

“Quiet,” Joon cut him off. “Continue.”

Although their sessions were cut short, Jon was using what he remembered from Joon’s sessions in tactics to this particular moment. “These jhats probably need the quickest way southwards and this fort is all too tempting of a target. It is possible that they might concentrate their forces to either take the fort, or bypass it and take the town. If the town falls, they can move in any direction before other troops can respond.”

Joon looked closely at the town and Daeya Fort. “And do you have any evidence to support your supposition?” Even though he might have approved of Jon’s reasoning, he needed more.

“As you said, the Jogos Nhai believe in the moonsingers, and they predict a long winter. Do you think that they will risk more time trying to take the other forts or finding other ways southwards?” Jon asked. “Time is not on their side.”

“That is all conjecture, boy,” another brigade commander spat. “And what do you know about tactics and strategy? Have you served in the army? Have you ever been in battle?”

“No,” Jon shook his head.

“Then why should we listen to you?” General Jo scoffed. “You’re just a white devil lost in these lands. But more importantly, you’re a boy. You know shit about how to run an army.”

“‘The skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting, he captures their cities without laying siege to them, he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field,’” Jon recited, surprising most of the officers who did not expect that white devil to know the text that they all had to study. “I might not have much experience with battle, but I do know some basic principles thanks to your book. While the enemy is pressed for time, so are we. We cannot stay in the field without straining our supplies.”

“Ours?” another brigade commander stood up. “There is no ‘ours’ or ‘us’ if you’re included, gwailo! What gives you the right to speak to us?”

“Nothing,” Jon admitted. “But this army cannot just allow these jhats to come towards them using
a simple approach. It’s very likely that the enemy knows how we operate given your many centuries of fighting them. They can try to take the fort or go for the town, but the latter is more likely given that they would never risk their soldiers assaulting strong fortifications. If I were them, I’d use this other principle: ‘Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.’ That town is an opportunity that they would least expect soldiers to be present, so we have to protect against that.”

“Oh, so you think that if you studied our book, you are suddenly a specialist in warfare?” Adjutant Dae sneered at him before turning to Joon. “General, must we endure this boy’s ramblings any longer? His inexperience is starting to cause me a great headache. He should let the older men talk.”

Joon stared hard at his adjutant. “I might be tempted to do that,” Jon looked at him with shock. “If you give me another alternative to what this boy is suggesting.”

Adjutant Dae blinked in confusion. “General?”

“All of you keep talking about this boy being a white devil, but I haven’t heard any of you offer other plans that we may have. We’re officers, and our first priority is to crush the enemy. Therefore, I am open to all suggestions, even from foreigners in this matter, especially given the circumstances we now face.” None of the commanders did so. “Well?”

More than Lord Joon defending Jon, it was more that they didn’t have any other suggestion to offer without another pointing out the flaws. The discussion would have lasted more than a few hours, time that they could have spent actually carrying a good tactical plan.

“If none of you have any other plans to put forward, then here is my strategy,” Joon stood up. “General Jo, take half of your cavalry and conduct a screen along the forts in the northeast frontier. If you see any jhats come to you, don’t engage. Let them through the forts so we can cut them off from their plains.”

“Yes, general.”

“General Taruhito, have the infantry brigades divide into several formations to allow for quicker reaction to the enemy.”

“General,” he nodded.

“Quartermaster, tell Captain Stark to begin denying the land to the enemy. I’ll send part of the other half of the cavalry to assist him.”

“It will be done.”

“Adjutant Dae, get messages sent to the Northeast Governor. Tell them that we need his army to come as quickly as possible. There must be no delay.”

“It shall be done.”

“The rest of the cavalry will thus be deployed to the crossroads,” Joon ordered. “We can’t fortify the town, as that would make the jhats avoid it altogether. Therefore, I shall split the cavalry into two wings and keep them at a distance so that the Jogos Nhai will not spot them immediately. Any questions?”

Jon became surprised that Joon would incorporate his strategy. The other officers looked ready to protest, but all didn’t have anything to offer as rebuttals, so they kept silent.
“You have your orders. Dismissed.” The officer all left the tent while Jon kept standing. “Good plan you came up with. You applied the principles well.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Jon smiled.

“With that said, will you take responsibility if this plan fails to accomplish its objective?”

Jon didn’t expect him to answer that question. “What do you mean?”

“It is your plan after all, and therefore, you take the credit if it succeeds or fails. A leader must do that, or no one will follow him. So I ask again. Will you accept responsibility for whatever happens from here on out?”

Jon thought it over, but already knew what he had to answer with. “Yes, my lord. I will take responsibility.”

“Good. And one other thing. I’ve heard Starks have the ability to warg. Is that true?”

“Yes, it has happened.”

“Can you?”

Jon was stumped. “I haven’t tried, my lord.”

“From what I’ve read, wargs can be useful in scouting. I need you to be our lookout for this. See what your wolf can see. And if possible, lure them into the town.”

“How could I accomplish that?”

“Kind of difficult to not notice a white direwolf in day or night,” Joon remarked. “Also, it’s time you got blood on your swords. There might be more training on the way and you might have killed, but you learn through actual experiences. You ready?”

“Yes.”

“I hope so. And take that Chogo woman with you. She knows the land, so use her.”

Jon and Chanhee moved through the plains with Ghost by their side. They had to remain low in the tall grasses in case they were spotted by the Jogos Nhai, as Chanhee recommended. She carried a dagger with her, which she said was enough for the time being.

Remembering why he was moving alone with Chanhee and Ghost, Jon stopped his direwolf and put his forehead on his own. “I know that we haven’t used it before, but a lot of people are relying on us to know where the enemy is coming. And you can see better than I can. Can you help me boy?”

Ghost licked his cheek and smiled, which meant that he was willing to do it. Smiling back, Jon was now at a loss on how to actually warg. Why didn’t the books say anything about how wargs actually... warg?

Before the frustrations began to overwhelm him, Jon willed himself to calm down and sat down on the ground. Remembering Hoon’s teachings and how Joon got his various bouts of “enlightenment,” he crisscrossed his legs, put his hands on his knees, and closed his eyes as he slowed his breathing. He had to empty his mind of all distractions and focus on the task at hand. Come on. I’m ready.
After several minutes, he felt a jerk as he felt himself fall through the ground and into the darkness. But just as quickly as he fell down, he saw the grasslands again, but now looking at his own body as it lay still.

Seeing Chanhee shaking him to wake him, Jon had Ghost nudge his nose on Chanhee’s soft cheek. Looking straight into his red eyes, he could hear her ask, “Is that you?” Getting Ghost to nod his head, she put her hand on his nose. “Go, I’ll take care of your body while you’re gone.” With that, Jon in Ghost ran off into the plains.

Wolves had the ability to see vast distances, which was enhanced in direwolves since they could see further than their wolf brethren ever could, which combined with their sharpened sense of smell made them ideal to search for threats on the openness of the plain. But Jon had to be careful, since Ghost could be spotted easily with his white fur.

Jon moved around in Ghost for what seemed like hours, looking upon the town at the crossroads and small Daeya Fort. But unlike in his real body, Ghost did not get exhausted easily nor was he about to feel boredom after only a few moments of stagnation. That meant that he could continue to scout out the enemy without stopping.

Hearing galloping in the distance, Ghost turned to see… a massive horde of horses that had black and white stripes and swarthy riders. Squinting his eyes, they had the elongated heads characteristic of the Jogos Nhai. They’re coming!

But knowing that that Ghost couldn’t go back to his body and bring him and Chanhee back to the town in time, Jon asked his direwolf, “Boy, I need you to howl.” Sensing his hesitation, he pressed him. “I know you’re usually quiet, but just this one time, please.”

It was the only way to warn them in time, as Jon hoped that Joon could recognize a direwolf’s, much less a wolf’s howl. Mustering up what he could, Ghost looked to the sky and let out a sound that strained his throat. “Again,” Jon said to Ghost. The direwolf did so, but louder that time.

Running to the town, Ghost could see the cavalry rushing into their positions as General Jo ordered them about. Lord Joon heard it. Thank the gods.

Ghost ran back to Jon’s body as fast as he could. But before he could reenter Jon’s body, he saw a group of imperial cavalry moving through the grass. Who are these men?

Laying low, Ghost listened to the cavalrymen talking amongst themselves in nihongo.

“So, we’re to enter battle because of a fucking wolf?”

“That’s not the main problem. Why is the general following the words of a white devil?”

“It’s all strange, but what really pisses me off is that Chogo bitch that devil has with him. I’m not going let her striking me slide by.”

“So, after the battle, we kill her?”

“Not before we have some fun with her,” one of them chuckled darkly.

“And don’t forget. That white devil has made an enemy in the Tiqui magistrate. He offered a large reward to anyone who would kill him, more alive, since this expedition essentially ensured that whatever investigation he wants to happen will not for many moons.”

“A magistrate offering rewards? That white boy must’ve really pissed him off.”
“Hey, that boy is just business. The Chogo bitch, she’s just a bonus.”

“And why are we talking in the southern language? We’re Goi. We should speak in our tongue now.”

Jon through Ghost couldn’t understand the Goi tongue, but what they just discussed alarmed him. I’ve got a bounty on my head?

Acting quickly, Ghost dashed through the grass and reunited with Jon, allowing him to come to.

Breathing hard and feeling Chanhee rubbing his chest and back to calm him, Jon told her what he had heard.

“Goi…” Chanhee shook her head. “Of course they would do this.”

“We have to go back to the town. Warn Lord Joon.”

“No,” Chanhee answered.

“Why not?”

“That town is full of imperial cavalry, many of whom are Goi. You really think that they don’t have the same ideas as those bastards coming for us?”

“No. We have to find Lord Joon. He’ll protect us.”

“Right now, Lord Joon has bigger issues than protecting us. Also, he’s not going to concern himself with dealing with his own horsemen.”

“That’s not true,” Jon shook his head.

Chanhee exhaled in frustration. “Well, we can’t go back to the town either way.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“We fight those that are coming.”

“Can’t we just hide?”

“They’re cavalry. They’re almost as good as my people and the Jogos Nhai on the plains. They’ll find us eventually. Besides, what’s the point of all of that training if you’re not going to use it?”

Not denying her logic, Jon nodded his head and pulled out Longclaw from his back. “Ghost, hide somewhere close. Attack them when I give the signal.”

As his direwolf obeyed, Jon and Chanhee readied themselves for the coming onslaught. Then, the Goi entered their line of sight, causing Jon and Chanhee to tight their hold on their weapons.

Seeing them, the Goi galloped faster and then circled around them before dismounting. There were eight in total. “Well, well. The white devil and his Chogo whore,” one of them said in guanhua so that they’ll both understand.

“What do you want?” Jon didn’t take his insult her well at all.

“Justice,” he said. “That bitch struck me,” he lifted his helmet and revealed the scar from Chanhee bleeding his cheek. “It’s time I get what I am owed, in blood.”
Jon put himself in front of Chanhee. “You’ll have to go through me, you son of a bitch.”

The man, as well as the others, drew their daos. “With pleasure. The magistrate is offering a handsome price for your head. Two thousand tael dead, four thousand alive. The way we see it, you’re more useful still breathing.”

“Well, you’re not going to see a single tael, cause I will rather die than let you harm me or her.”

“Make this easy for yourself, boy. Step aside and we won’t beat you.”

“Fuck you.”

The Goi man sighed. “As you wish. Shame, I could have used four thousand tael.” As he raised his dao and swung, Jon parried with Longclaw.

“Ghost, now!”

The white direwolf jumped over the horses and surprised the Goi men, who were unable to react quickly to a strange creature attacking them. While Ghost took care of two, Chanhee grabbed a dao and started slashing at the Goi, who were shock at a woman being able to fight.

As for Jon, he pushed the man back with Longclaw before reengaging. He attempted a thrust with his dao before Jon blocked it and swung it away. Valyrian steel clanged on regular steel, and while the dao was easier to handle, Longclaw had the reach and thus allowing its wielder to keep his opponent at a distance.

Ghost finished crushed two of the Goi’s skulls with his jaws before seeing Chanhee swinging away to keep three others from approaching her. The direwolf jumped on two of them, leaving the last one for her to handle. She expertly twirled the dao with her wrist before using the momentum to force her adversary’s sword from his hand, allowing him to slash across his throat, decapitating him. Ghost was surprised at how she handled the sword, but was going to let Jon do the asking as they both moved on the rest.

Jon eventually cut the Goi’s shoulder, distracting him long enough to bring Longclaw’s hilt to his face, stunning him. Finally, Jon stabbed him through the heart, but in a last act, his enemy grabbed at his face and gritted his teeth to try to scratch him. But it was too no avail, as the light left his eyes and he collapsed.

Before Jon could readjust himself, he felt himself thrown to the ground as another and bigger Goi got the jump on him. As he dropped Longclaw, Jon acted quickly and unsheathed Dark Sister. Remembering how Hoon Ti drew his sword, he drew quickly enough to cut across his adversary’s belly before he got any closer.

But that was not enough, as he ignored his wound and went for Jon’s neck. Seeing a craze in his eyes, Jon discarded Dark Sister and grabbed at the Goi’s face while he went for his throat. Even as he stuck his thumbs in his eyes, the Goi kept choking him. Feeling the air blocked in his throat, he felt his face turn blue before the Goi’s head came clean off.

Taking in a few breaths, Jon looked to see Chanhee holding Dark Sister. Offering her hand, he took it and saw the corpses lying around him.

“My gods,” Jon took note of the bodies. “We killed them.”

“It was either us or them,” Chanhee gave Dark Sister back to Jon while he picked up Longclaw and sheathed them both. “We need to get out of here.”
“Chanhee,” Jon’s mind cleared. “Where did you learn how to use a sword?”

“Long story, which I will tell once we get out of here,” she tucked her dao on her waist with her dagger.

“We have to go to Lord Joon.”

Chanhee clapped in front of Jon’s face and it was loud that he could rings in his hears. “Are you fucking stupid? We just killed imperial cavalry. Lord Joon can’t help us.”

“They were Goi. They tried to kill you and get a bounty on my head,” Jon tried to reason with her.

“And you think the empire will listen to us? We killed people who took the emperor’s silver. Whether or not he likes us, he has to punish us. And he’ll give us a death sentence. We need to go,” Chanhee shook him.

“But where will we go?”

“Anywhere but here,” Chanhee took his hand and dragged from the pile of corpses as she forced him on a horse.

“Maybe we could find my uncle,” Jon said. “He can help us.”

“But we don’t know where he is,” Chanhee mounted her own horse. “Right now, we have to get to the Shrinking Sea for starters. When we get there, we can plan our next move.”

Jon was feeling so many things at the moment. Shock at what had just happened, anger at the Goi for trying to harm them, fear if what Chanhee said was true, worry that Lord Joon would have to hunt them and where Benjen was. How did this happen?

But before he could think further, Chanhee nudged her horse next to Jon’s, where she brought him into a deep kiss to get him out of his stupor. “Trust me. I know these lands better than imperial cavalry. At least this way, we have a chance.”

Jon and Ghost followed close behind Chanhee as they went further into the plains. Fleeing deeper in the wilderness, Jon could only think, Careless. We got much too careless, referring to himself, Benjen, and Sam with sorrow. They were so safe at Kushiro that they began to forget how much in danger they were truly in. And now, the magistrate wanted him dead and the Goi nearly killed him and Chanhee, forcing them to spill blood.

They rode all day and into the next, made fugitives due to old hatreds.

Chapter End Notes

Didn't expect that twist? I actually didn't consider including that until much later in the process, but I felt that it adds to the uncertainty that defines GoT among other things. Also, it's important because Jon was getting too comfortable where he was, so he needs to be alert again. Same with Benjen and Sam.

The whole prince was crisis is based on the Temu Crisis, which was just a political and military mess caused by an incompetent Ming emperor and a Mongol warlord who didn't know how to leverage his prize. That's what this is, since the YiTi crown prince
made a colossal error and now, our protagonists have ended up here.

And this is also important since Jon and Chanhee can now explore the steppes, with Jon discovering more things about himself. But will Lord Joon come through and protect him if he shows up again? We'll have to see.
Finding a Solution

Chapter Notes

Hope you all are feeling safe and the worst will pass soon. For those who were disappointed at Jon not fighting, I hope this is a good alternative. And don't worry, there will be plenty of other battles for him to fight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Benjen swung his sword across the belly of a Jogos Nhai just as he tried to make a pass at him on his zorse. The force was so strong that it knocked the large-headed man off of his mount and with a deep cut in his abdomen.

But unlike some of the troops in his brigade, the former First Ranger knew what it was to kill and he had to move on from one Jogos Nhai to the next. Again, he had to appreciate the irony of his current situation. From fighting wildlings to fighting men on black and white horses, both of whom hate southerners, he mused lightly.

The purpose of the flying column was to advance ahead of the main army to scout out enemy presence and disengage when faced with large threats. The column’s mixture of light infantry and cavalry allowed them much greater flexibility than most brigades in the army, and from the manuals that he read, the black powder weapons would help them fend off all of the threats from the steppes.

But following Lord Joon’s orders and not taking their heavy weapons such as the hwacha with him, they had to rely on the tanegashima and ceramic casings filled with black powder. The hwacha would have been quite useful for them in scattering the large-headed mounted men.

What struck Benjen more was how the Jogos Nhai fought. Usually, they would conduct a skirmish with an imperial patrol and disappear back into the plains, knowing full well that they didn’t stand a chance against the organized might of the Yi-Ti armies. However, they were just charging on his brigade in full bands, one hundred at the most, and kept coming. Something’s driving them to fight like this. Maybe they really want to avoid the winter, but this is something else.

Knowing that they were not on favorable terrain and it was likely that there were more Jogos Nhai out there, Benjen made the decision to order a fighting withdrawal back to the main camp. Directing the battalion captains to organize their men into squares, with pikes arranged in two rows and the missile troops positioned between them, he also had the cavalry arranged along the flanks. Remembering something that he had learned from his ranging beyond the Wall, he told each of the battalion captains to step back a few paces after they fended off a band of mounted Jogos Nhai.

Seeing the first band of Jogos Nhai emerge, he nodded to Lieutenant Lim, who wiped the sweat from his brow. “At two hundred paces, ready repeating crossbows!” he ordered.

There were fifty men armed with those repeating crossbows in each of the three squares, each carrying ten bolts. A good characteristic of them was that they could let off a constant volley and cause much damage to the enemy quickly. However, their main drawback was that while the bolts could be easily loaded, their fast rate sometimes sacrificed accuracy, which they sorely needed against their adversaries.
The first band of Jogos Nhai entered the effective range of the crossbows, their large bronze swords and spears lowered to strike at their enemies. “Loose!” Lieutenant Lim gave the command.

A score of crossbow bolts flew through the air before striking at the Jogos Nhai, cutting down many and forcing several of their zorses to stop. Seeing how many of their brothers were dying, the first band of Jogos Nhai fell back and galloped back into the plains.

The troops cheered as they saw their adversaries run away, and their spirits rose as they got their first kills after suffering from their previous commander. However, Benjen remained silent, knowing that it was not over. “Lieutenant, begin the withdrawal.”

Lim nodded, also knowing that they couldn’t stay in the plains indefinitely and away from the main army. Relaying his orders, the infantry took a few paces backwards while keeping their weapons pointed at the opposite ends of the steppes. It might have been a slow process of rejoining Lord Joon’s main formations, but Benjen kept saying to himself, “Slow is fast. Fast is slow.” If we tried to make a run for it, our rear will be exposed.

Surely enough, another band of Jogos Nhai charged towards them. Crossbow bolts flew through the air and more of the zorse-mounted men became corpses on the ground, allowing them more paces backwards. However, while only one hundred men charged at them, it was continuous and more anxiety spread among the ranks as it seemed to never end. There has to be a larger force out there, Benjen thought, knowing from the wildlings that such people did not stop attack no matter the scale.

“Lieutenant, get a messenger to Lord Joon. Tell him we might need reinforcements and fast,” he told Minoru Lim.

“You think something big is coming?”

“You see how only a hundred men are attacking at a time and we pierce their bodies with bolts each time? They’re probably waiting for us to use up our bolts before delivering the anvil on us.”

“How do you know that, captain?”

“I’ve seen it happen before, lieutenant, north of the Wall. And it’s what I would do if my own troops were outnumbered or outmatched,” Benjen observed the situation around him. Trusting his commander’s instincts, Lim had one of the cavalryman gallop southwards back to the main camp with all possible haste.

While slowing pacing backwards, Benjen saw that there were no hundred-man bands charging at them, causing him to grip his sword tighter. “Ready the tanegashima and the ceramic casings,” he told Lim. “I have a feeling that our bolts will run out.”

“If we have to fire those weapons, the enemy will be within reach of our pikes and blades before we get another volley off,” Lim pointed out.

“I know, but best we use whatever weapons we’ve got when the times comes,” Benjen replied. Sighing, Lim told the missile troops to ready their black powder weapons, or at least the ones they could hold in their hands.

Suddenly, a piercing blare could be heard throughout the plains, as a horn from a Jogos Nhai blew hard. Glancing at the plains around the brigade, Benjen then heard galloping of hoofs, more than a hundred from what he could make out. Eyes narrowing to get a clearer look into the distance, it soon became wide when he, and his troops could see hundreds of Jogos Nhai charging towards
“I count… seven hundred or eight hundred men,” Lim estimated while alarmed.

“Me too,” Benjen said. “But that’s probably the first wave. There’s more of them.”

Lim controlled his shaky breaths as he unsheathed his dao and the enemy came closer to them.

Coming within two hundred paces, the crossbows released their bolts, felling many more Jogos Nhai but it did nothing to stop their charge. Seeing what was happening, Benjen told Lim, “Have the crossbows release at will and have the other missile troops to ready their arms.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lim acknowledged before relaying the order. No longer firing in volleys, the repeating crossbows flew through the air at a constant pace while the others steadied their tanegashima. Benjen was nervous at how they would perform in battle, having never actually seen them be fired in anger, but there was no better time than to see those weapons with promise eliminate their foes.

One of the soldiers ran up to Benjen on his horse. “Captain, we’re running low on crossbow bolts.”

“Prepare to fire the black powder and to engage in close combat,” he told him. “This might be a long fight before we get to the main camp.”

“Yes, captain.”

Eventually, the crossbows stopped releasing bolts, causing the rest of the missile troops to switch to black powder, with the tanegashima readied. Meanwhile, the pikemen prepared to meet the Jogos Nhai.

“Steady!” Benjen ordered as the distance closed between them. “Steady!” he repeated. Once they were within fifty paces of the troops, very close range for them, he yelled, “Fire!”

A cloud of smoke and a storm of flash was unleashed as hundreds of iron balls were hurled from their metal rods and towards their targets. While the maximum effective range for the tanegashima was twice the distance of where they were fired from, Benjen was not going to take chances and brought the enemy close enough so that every iron ball counted.

The result might have been a shroud of smoke clouding his vision, but as it cleared, corpses laid about on the ground. They were strewn about in various positions and not even the zorses were spared, with some having landed atop their riders and crushing them from above. Holes could be seen in the torso, the head, or the limbs of their mounted foes, while a few who managed to survive were crawling away from his troops.

*My gods… what did these people create?* Benjen thought in wonder as he surveyed the damage.

However, defying all expectations, another horn blasted and more Jogos Nhai came charging towards them. Seeing how long it took to reload, Benjen dismounted his horse and readied to fight alongside the men.

“Captain, you can’t risk yourself. You’re the commander,” Lim also dismounted but to stop him.

“All the more reason why I should. I suggest you get back on your horse or fight alongside us,” Benjen told the lieutenant.

Groaning in frustration, Lim stepped to be at Benjen’s side. “Oh, what the hell? Might as well.”
Benjen nodded, approving his subordinate’s decision before yelling to the troops, “Stand your ground!” The officers repeated his orders as the Jogos Nhai came closer. Then, the first were pierced by the pikes and were felled while the rest attempted to flank them, to be countered by the imperial cavalry.

Benjen kept close to the infantry, knowing that he’ll be overwhelmed if he fought alone. Most of the enemy charged at them with their spears and large bronze swords, but there was no actual tactical design. They tried to run through the ranks with their zorses, only to be repelled by the pikes and them trying again. Those who were unlucky to be unhorsed, they slashed wildly at the troops. It took two or three to take them down, as the Jogos Nhai possessed considerable strength and a certain kind of persistence that carried them on even though they were outmatched in terms of weaponry.

As for Benjen, he found himself fighting with one of those big-headed men with a large rectangular bronze blade. He swung upwards to Benjen, but he reacted faster and countered with his sword. Seeing that his attack was blocked, the Jogos Nhai spun around to hit him from the other side, but he jumped backwards in time and closed the distance between them, where his sword buried itself in his foe’s chest. He pulled it out just in time to see another attack him, this time with a club-like weapon similar to some that he had seen from the wildlings.

Benjen ducked beneath his swing before pushing him backwards onto the ground. Before he could get back up, he took his broadsword and swung across the Jogos Nhai’s neck, severing his head. He looked up to see another Jogos Nhai charge at him, with his spear pointed downwards. But Benjen readied himself and looked as if the shaft will run through him. At the last possible moment, he stepped sideways to avoid being run over by the zorse, grabbed the shaft as it passed, and forced it from the rider’s hand as he fell from his mount, to be killed by the other troops waiting for him.

Benjen held his foe’s spear in his hand as he saw yet one more Jogos Nhai charge. However, it was too close for him to pierce him with the bronze head, so he used the shaft as a club to force the rider from his zorse and then ran him through while still on the ground.

“Get back!” Benjen was grabbed by Lim as arrows started to pepper the ranks, killing some. Looking at Lim and nodding in thanks, he turned to see that some of the zorse riders had arrived with bows in their hands.

“We can’t stay here forever, Captain,” Lim reminded him. “We have to continue to withdraw.”

“Right,” Benjen agreed. “Get the ceramic casings out!”

“Yes, captain!” The missile troops were all armed with at least two. Each ceramic casing was filled with black powder, which was ignited with a fuse that could be lit by fire, and was thrown against the enemy should they come too close for comfort. Let’s see how they work.

Benjen was handed one by one of the troops, who then lit the fuse. “Hold steady!” he ordered. As more of the zorse riders came at them, this time with bows and letting loose their arrows on the troops, he waited for them to close the distance, again. “Now!” He threw as hard as he could, as dozens of other casings were hurled at the enemy.

A chain of blasts was seen by the troops as the casings burst and the force of was enough to startle the zorses. Some of the ceramics then buried themselves against the zorse riders, many of which was fatal as they entered vital areas. More smoke filled the field and more corpses were strewn across it.
Benjen prepared for another charge, but to his surprise, the Jogos Nhai finally fell back and rode into the distance of the plains. Seeing the enemy disperse and despite the smoke and the smell of the dead, the troops cheered.

“We need to hurry,” Benjen told Lim. “Have the cavalry cover our withdrawal and have the infantry into marching formation. They’ll be back.”

“Yes, captain,” Lim nodded as he sheathed his dao, mounted his horse, and move to let the other battalion captains know their new orders.

As they marched back, he saw that not all had made it out of that little battle alive. Still, it was something given that only moons ago, they were addicted to substances. *Hopefully, they continue to perform like this in the battles ahead.* This might have been their first success, but they would be wrong to assume that it would continue.

“What are you talking about?” Benjen couldn’t understand what he was hearing.

“Your nephew, Captain Stark, is a murderer and a deserter,” sneered Feng Jo. “Eight of my troops are dead and he ran off with that Chogo whore and his white beast. I should have known he would show his true colors when he had the chance.”

“You don’t know that!” he defended Jon.

“Careful with your tone, Captain,” General Taruhito warned him. “You are speaking to your superior officer.”

“And I am his superior, General Taruhito, as I am yours,” Joon reminded him. “But he does have a point, Captain. Be careful how you address your ranking officers.”

“Generals,” Benjen calmed down. “I am aware of what Jon did, regarding his words on the crossroads. He gave sound tactical advice despite him being green and you all repelled the enemy. Can a turncloak be able to achieve that?”

“How did he know the enemy would strike there?” Adjutant Dae posed. “If anything, he might have known where the enemy was because he was in communication with them via that Chogo bitch he had with him.”

Joon sighed in annoyance. “Adjutant, there are many problems with what you’re saying and it shows that either you don’t remember how long the Chogo and the Jogos Nhai were at war with each other, or you’re just looking to point fingers. Whatever the case, do not baseless accusations without proof.”

“What more proof do we need, general?” cried out General Jo. “Eight imperial soldiers are dead. If Captain Stark’s nephew and his Chogo bitch were innocent, why did they disappear?”

“Probably because those men were Goi, and they would’ve harmed them anyway,” Benjen shot back. “General,” he added, but with disdain lining it.

“And why were those men out of position?” Quartermaster Shin asked. This surprised all of them, especially Benjen given their last serious conversation at headquarters. “The crossroads were a long distance away from where they died and very far from the main enemy advance. There was no reason for them to be there, unless they were there to settle scores.”

Out of all of the people to side with Benjen, or at least point out the facts, it had to be the
quartermaster, who didn’t hide his disdain for him, Sam, and Jon for being white devils. At the same time, he was a professional soldier and the officers working under him acknowledged his ability and relative lack of bias. *Gods, I hate when this happens,* Benjen thought.

“They could’ve been scouting,” Feng Jo offered weakly.

“But why them? From what I got, one of the cavalrymen dead was the same one that the Chogo woman struck three moons ago,” Shin said. “In addition, Jon Snow was acting as the scout, so why the redundancy?”

“Oh, so you’re siding with the white devils now?” Adjutant Dae scoffed. “Of course you would. Common litter working with white litter. How convenient.”

“What did you say?” Shin bit down on his jaw in anger.

“Enough!” Joon stopped them from trading blows and also stopping the discussion before it devolved into more personal attacks. “This bickering is pointless. Our focus remains on the repelling the renegade jhats and recovering the Crown Prince. However, the disappearance of Jon Snow and Chanhee,” he made sure to remind them all of the woman’s name despite their prejudice against the Chogo. “Is a pressing matter. Whether they killed imperial soldiers in cold blood or had extenuating circumstances will be determined once they return to camp. For now, I shall order the provosts to find them and arrest them both. Should they resist, I’m giving them permission to kill them.”

Benjen’s eyes widened in shock, while the officers nodded in agreement. Lord Joon then dismissed them back to their brigades and duties. As Benjen exited the tent, head slumped, Joon stopped him. “Captain Stark, a moment if you will.”

The officers grumbled at the “white devil” having a personal audience with their commander, but they left the tent without another word.

“You’re going to kill them?” Benjen’s main concern at that point was his nephew, all that was left of Lyanna.

“Your nephew is making my life very difficult,” Joon bluntly told him. “And now, he’s being accused of murder and desertion. I don’t have to tell you what the consequences are for both.”

“General, please,” Benjen pleaded him. “You’ve known Jon for six moons now. He would not do this unless he had good reason to.”

“Then why not come back to camp and explain himself? Why run?”

“Given that the dead men are Goi, he must’ve assumed that you would be forced to kill him, because they were imperial troops. Also, he might have been killed if he did try to return, as there will be plenty of others who want to do him harm because of Chanhee,” Benjen supposed.

“Well, he will have plenty of opportunities to defend himself once he surrenders to the provosts.”

“Please don’t do this,” Benjen pressed on.

“There are consequences to every action,” Joon replied. “But if you’re so sure of your nephew’s innocence… go find him.”

“General?” Benjen became very baffled.
“Relax,” Joon poured him a cup of tea, which Benjen refused. “It’s bad manners to refuse one’s offering of tea, especially if it came from a lord. Drink it.”

Reluctantly, he took the cup and drank it before setting it on Joon’s table.

“You’re his kin and I understand the need to defend him,” Joon said. “I also know what happens if I try to stop kin from protecting other kin, so if you really think that your nephew wouldn’t do this without reason, go find him then.”

“How, general? I don’t know where he is.”

“Neither will the provosts. It also doesn’t help that my current provost-general was demoted for incompetence in Asabhad but he was able to come here because his father spoke to another man well-connected to court,” Joon grunted in disgust while pouring himself a cup.

Benjen became more puzzled. “Wait, if your provost commander is what you say he is, then—”

“The provosts will have much difficulty even in getting started,” Joon scoffed.

“Ah,” Benjen began to understand. “So, you ordering the provosts to find or kill Jon was merely cover?”

“Can’t have my officers be too curious of why you, your nephew, and his friend are at my house in the first place,” Joon stated. “Besides, I am aware of what may happen should Daeron die. His dragon might become uncontrollable if he were to pass on and that’s an outcome that none of us wish to have.”

Benjen nodded, accepting the cold logic of Lord Joon. “So, you’re not doing just because you care for Jon’s safety? His dragon might burn down Kushiro if she’s without a bond companion?”

“Precisely,” Joon admitted. “There is value in having a Targaryen under my roof, even though his name means nothing out here, and more so because of his dragon. I’ve left Sam with specific instructions on how to feed the dragon and I told my lady wife to keep everyone quiet for the time being.”

Benjen exhaled, being reminded that their host didn’t take them in out of the goodness of his heart. “Any idea on where I can start?”

“If I were them, I’d head towards the Shrinking Sea,” Joon pointed on the map. “It’s the only place in the plains that is hostile to any horses or zorses due to uneven surfaces. I’d make camp there and plan out my next move while relatively safe from any Jogos Nhai and imperial patrols.”

“And that’s where I’ll go,” Benjen stood up to leave the tent.

“Make sure to keep your men in the dark,” Joon warned him. “They might not be as amenable once they realize that you’re going there for family reasons.”

“Will do,” Benjen acknowledged.

“And understand this. This conversation never happened,” Joon told him. “Should you mess up or should the provosts find Daeron before you do, I’ll deny all knowledge. Can we agree upon that?”

He bobbed his head. “Yes, general.”

“On another note, you’ve done well, Captain. Your execution of that withdrawal was quite
exceptional from what I’ve heard, and you only sustained some casualties,” Joon changed the topics momentarily. “Off you go.”

Benjen finally left the tent, but with another purpose in mind. Going back to his brigade’s tents, he found Lieutenant Lim making reports in their own command tent. “Ah, Captain Stark.”

“How soon can we march?”

Lim became surprised. “So soon, Captain?”

“I’ve received word that the enemy was striking from the Shivering Sea,” Benjen lied. “I ask again. How soon can we march?”

“The infantry need more rest,” Lim said. “But… half of the cavalry can be brought up.”

“I’ll take that and lead them to the Shivering Sea,” Benjen chose.

“I’m confused. We just withdrew back to the main camp. Why not let the enemy come here?”

“It’s important. General Kitara has tasked me with a special assignment, and I need to move as soon as I can,” Benjen partially lied.

“I see,” Lim knew that something was going on, but decided not to ask further. “Then I guess I will command until you return.” Benjen nodded. “Well, nothing I am not familiar with.”

“Good man,” Benjen patted his shoulder. “But I promise. I’ll be back soon.”

“But exercise caution, Captain. It would be a shame if you left after leading us through our first battle,” Lim smiled good-naturedly.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see me soon enough,” Benjen grinned back before leaving the tent.

The next morning, Benjen and one thousand cavalry, half of them being armed with ceramic casings and tanegashima strapped to their backs after the missile troops gave it to them, galloped back into the plains. *Hang tight, Jon. I’ll find you.*

Jon scooped up some water from the crystal-clear lake in the Shrinking Sea. He was smart enough not to drink it immediately and took it to the fire, boiling it to kill off any impurities. It was something that Hoon Ti taught him when he recollected his time as an officer in the army, which wasn’t exactly surprising to Jon given how much he knew about fighting.

“How long did you serve in the army?” Jon asked.

“Eleven years,” Hoon answered. “Before that, I trained for six years at a shrine in the Bone Mountains, the edges directly controlled by the empire. That’s where I learned combat arts and studied for the military examinations.”

“What did you do in the army?”

Hoon smiled sadly. “I was a spy. I reported to the Quartermaster-General of the Imperial Army in Yin while retaining a commission, allowing me to enter various situations. But I soon realized that I was disposable, as empires and kingdoms use you up and throw you away once they’re done. Once I became blind, I was left to beg in the streets until Lord Joon took me to Kushiro.”

“And that’s why you stuck with him?”
“I don’t know how lords are like in Westeros, but even without their own armies to control, lords in this empire are very barbaric no matter how much pride they take in their worldly views and possessions. At least Lord Joon understands that and he doesn’t try to hide from it.”

Jon crossed his arms. “So the only way to survive in this world is to be willing to step on others and possibly kill those that had done nothing to me?”

Hoon laughed in amusement. “Oh, you still have much to learn. You’re a Targaryen, the last dragonlords of Valyria and heir to the Iron Throne through the most senior line. Basically, you come from a line of murderers.”

That got his attention. “What did you say?”

“You think your ancestor Aegon the Conqueror forged your iron throne because he asked nicely? No. He conquered Westeros because he could and he had his sister-wives to help him. There was no reason for him to do so, but he did it anyway. I could say more about your family that did commit murder: Daemon Targaryen, your namesake, Maegor, Aegon the Unworthy, Aegon the Unlikely, Jaehaerys, and Baelon. If we’re talking about both sides of your family, it’s also filled with murderers,” Hoon decided to push him.

“Weren’t their killings justified?” Jon never questioned about killing, until now.

Hoon scoffed. “You’re japing me, right? Your ancestors took the lives of fathers, sons, brothers, nephews, cousins, and much more, leaving their families with much less members. No matter how much justification you can give yourself, you still cannot ignore the fact that someone will cry and their hearts ripping out because of the life you took.”

Jon gulped, having never thought of it that way.

“Murder is murder. Unfortunately, that is a fact of life that none of us can avoid. There is no such thing as innocence or justification, because no one can take a life if they really exhibited concern over their well-being,” Hoon continued.

“Why are you telling me this?” Jon wanted to know the reason why Hoon was pushing him.

“Because… whether you want to or not, the blood that runs in your veins will make you a target for those that will see you as a threat. The only way to survive is to gain power and strength for yourself, but you will have to commit… actions that would run against your conscience. That’s probably what differentiates between the powerful and the powerless, since the latter cannot under any circumstance kill to survive and that is why they will always be where they are,” Hoon concluded.

“What about you? You don’t have any power,” Jon pointed out.

“That’s because I know that I won’t be able to survive in the long-term if I was among the powerful,” Hoon admitted. “But at least this way, I can reflect on the deeper meanings of life and help those who might become victims of those with power. You, on the other hand, will need to do it and that is why I say these things.”

“But how could you know if you didn’t have any power yourself?”

“Through my time as a spy, I learned what it was to be among those with authority and influence. The ones who survive are the ones with no compunction in killing, even those who others see as ‘innocent.’ If you want to survive as a Prince of House Targaryen, that’s what you must do. Be like your ancestors and focus on surviving, as you cannot do anything if you’re dead,” Hoon finally
As Jon watched the water boil, he reflected on the many things that his ancestors, both Targaryen and Stark, did throughout their entire existence. Hoon’s words made sense, which only frustrated him because he never had to deal with such matters as a bastard. But as the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark, people will see him as a threat like Hoon said. And only days ago, he had to kill in order to survive. Before that, he had to kill in order to save Ghost from becoming a fur coat. Sometimes, I wish for when things were simpler, Jon thought wistfully. But will I have it in me the next time I have to kill to survive?

“Jon,” he looked up and saw Chanhee and Ghost approaching him. “Getting some water ready?”

“Yes,” Jon nodded, scratching Ghost’s neck as the direwolf walked up to him. Seeing Chanhee struggle with what looked like a goat carcass, Jon ran up to her and helped set the animal down in front of the fire.

“I trust you know how to dress a fresh kill?” Chanhee asked. Jon nodded before unsheathing his dagger and began cutting open the goat-like carcass, removing its innards and its outer skin to prepare it for cooking.

“How did you find this?” He knew that finding a goat-like creature in the desolation of the plains was incredibly difficult, especially given their competition.

“ Took a few hours, from what I could guess,” Chanhee answered as she cut away pieces of the flesh to cook over the fire. “Ghost helped. But don’t expect to eat this every day.”

“Right,” Jon moved the innards away from their camp while waving away their rank smell. Seeing Ghost licking his mouth, he cut off a leg and pushed it to the direwolf, who then started devouring his meal.

He took the water off of the fire to allow it to cool while they began roasting their meat. Seeing it cooked, they each gave each other pieces while drinking the same water. It wasn’t as succulent as the foods he ate at Winterfell or at Kushiro, but then again, it was their most filling meal since running.

“Chanhee,” Jon swallowed a piece of the goat meat before remembering how Chanhee handled herself against the Goi. “Where did you learn how to fight like that?”

She finished her piece while taking another drink of water. “I had an uncle who had survived many encounters with the Jogos Nhai, the Goi, and the imperial army. He had to learn how to fight by himself since his parents, my grandparents, were killed by imperial cavalry. He taught me what I knew and some other things I picked up along the way.”

“And that probably was enough to fight off at least four cavalrymen,” Jon was still unsure of where she learned to how to fight with such fluidity.

“It’s a hard life out here, Jon,” Chanhee explained. “I will never be physically strong, but I could at least use the advantages I had in ensuring my own survival. Learning how to fight with weapons was not a choice, but a necessity.”

“So what do we do now?” Jon asked her. “We can’t just stay here. It’s very possible that some others will come here eventually find us.”

“I know,” Chanhee scratched her head. “Maybe… we can see if there is a way we can go southwards towards my people or maybe to Trader Town. I know someone there who owes me a
“Okay, then let’s get to Trader Town,” Jon agreed. “Assuming we can get past the imperial garrison there, who might have orders to capture us.”

“I have a way to communicate with my friend there,” Chanhee continued to eat. “He’ll probably sneak us in.”

They consume the last of their roasted goat and drank the last of the disinfected water as the winds continued to blow softly around them.

“Hey, Jon,” Chanhee turned to him. “I’ve noticed that you talked a lot with the girls at Kushiro.”

Jon laughed. “I’m sorry. How did that enter your mind just now?”

“Just saying,” she shrugged. “You being a prince has increased your confidence?”

“I wouldn’t say so. I just… have less doubts about who I am now that I know.”

“I like it,” Chanhee grinned. “A man who’s sure of himself can do very much. I’ve known my share of men who say think they know they are but are actually insecure like little boys.”

“Tell me about it,” Jon remembered Joffrey.

“And my brother was no different. It’s great to finally meet a man who doesn’t really need others to tell him who he should be,” she continued.

“I don’t know about that,” Jon partially disagreed. “I still have a lot to learn and I still have a lot of years to go.”

“Oh, you don’t have confidence?” Chanhee shifted closer to Jon while grasping his arm. “Cause I think that would be more interesting if you did.”

Jon’s eyes softened at the wild beauty of the plains staring closely into his grey eyes with her brown ones. “It would, wouldn’t it?”

Chanhee pulled him into a deep kiss, wrapping her arms around Jon as he wrapped his around her. They both fell to the ground as their lips became sloppier and the heat between them became more intense. However, she opened her eyes, stopped kissing Jon, and sat back up. He remained on the ground, stupefied at why she stopped. “I’m sorry, Jon. I think I rushed it.”

“No need to say sorry,” Jon sat up with her and pulled her head underneath his. “I understand. You won’t be forced into anything and you shouldn’t be rushed into this. We’ll take it step by step, like I promised.”

Chanhee looked up, grateful. “Thank you.”

“What’s there to thank?” Jon smiled. “But to be honest, you do look very good. But I should always respect others.”

She kissed his cheek. “Oh, my. Where have you been all my life?”

“I’m right here,” Jon hugged her closer. “I’m right here. Besides, Ghost might’ve whined if we… went further.”

Chanhee then remembered Ghost was next to them and laughed. “Right. Wouldn’t want a direwolf
seeing us… you know.”

Ghost moved to them before laying on both of their legs, as if to prove their point. They both ran their hands along his white fur and continued to watch the wind blow against the tall grasses, enjoying the ocean-like waves that it caused.

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Ghost moved through the tall grass, careful not to make any extra noises as he looked out for any threat that could approach his bond companion and his lady one. Even at night, white fur can be seen easily and there was not telling what may come.

Then, the direwolf heard galloping, causing Ghost to lie down. Using his perfect vision, he saw a band of Jogos Nhai run past him as they seemed to move towards the Shrinking Sea. Worried that they might come across Jon and Chanhee, he followed them.

But thankfully, they didn’t even come close to their camp and had moved further north, specifically the northern shore of the big lake among the Shrinking Sea. Remembering to keep a low profile, Ghost saw a large camp on the edge of the northern shore, with thousands of Jogos Nhai mulling about on their zorses and with their weapons. There were fires dotting the flat landscape and chatter piercing through the rather calm sky.

What was worse for Ghost was that Jon would not be able to understand what the Jogos Nhai were saying, as he didn’t know their tongue. But seeing that he came across a major Jogos Nhai encampment, he decided to investigate further.

Ghost kept to the far edge of the camp, careful not to alert any of their guards. His plan was to survey the camp and see if they were threats. Once he observed them long enough, he would return to Jon and Chanhee and they would figure out what to do next.

Scanning through the various tents for more than a few moments, possibly past the hour of the wolf or whatever time they used in these lands, Ghost spotted something out of the ordinary. From their largest tent, assumedly their command one, came a well-dressed man bound with thick rope, his mouth gagged, and his hair disheveled. His clothes definitely belonged to wealth and power, judging from the black silks, golden threads, and heavy boots.

But what really drew Ghost’s attention was what they were calling, something Sumeng Bu. They were jeering him on and pouring whatever they drunk onto his head while humiliating him further by throwing feces at his face and clothes.

Ghost went back to the camp as fast as possible while avoiding detection, reaching there by morning.

Jon woke up from his connection with Ghost, seeing his direwolf in on top of him before rubbing his head.

“Chanhee, we have to go,” Jon stood up while he prepared Longclaw and Dark Sister.

“What’s going on?” Chanhee became worried.

“I think I found the Crown Prince.”

“You did?” She was fully awake.

“He’s in a camp, on the northern shore of the big lake. We have to get him,” Jon was determined.
“How did you find him?” Chanhee looked to the direwolf before remembering. “Right. But why should we rescue him? He’s probably an incompetent bastard. Plus, his father the emperor did nothing for my people while we suffered because of the Goi.”

“True,” Jon took her word for it. “However, if we get the Prince, then we can go back to Lord Joon with protection. Whatever they might accuse us of will be wiped away once they see the Crown Prince in our possession.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s a hunch,” Jon honestly wasn’t sure if they were going to be protected because of the Prince. *But it’s a chance we have to take.*

Chanhee sighed, obviously not liking that they were risking their lives over a prince who seemed lacking. Seeing her doubt, Jon kissed her and surprising them both. “Do you trust me?”

Chanhee nodded. “But I won’t treat him with any respect just because he’s a prince.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to. Let’s just get him and get out,” Jon assured her.

Chanhee stood up and tucked her dao on her waist. “Okay. Let’s get him.”

Chapter End Notes

Benjen’s actions were based on a number of tactical withdrawals that I studied. I hope this is a good substitute for the battle with Jogos Nhai, for which there will be more.

Joon is acting like a logical person, but he also knows something doesn't add up regarding Jon. That's why he sent Benjen to find him himself, since he'll have motivation to find his nephew and discover the truth.

Plus, we have more nuggets of wisdom from Hoon Ti, who is right and wrong. Nevertheless, this will be vital in Jon's development.

As for Jon and Chanhee, they're getting closer, but she still wants to take it slow, which Jon totally respects. And oh boy, they found the Crown Prince thanks to Ghost. Hopefully, Jon's reasoning pulls them through.

On another noted, we will see Meleys in action, so don't worry. And it'll be awesome :)}
Big Damn Dragons

Chapter Notes

This chapter took some more thought to put in, as there is also a lot happening. But please bear with me, as this is one several climaxes in the Yi-Ti arc before Jon inevitably starts his back to Westeros.

Also, stay safe and stay sane during this time of quarantine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam slid another piece cattle leg underneath the door of the stable, moving away quickly as Meleys burned it and the heat would have been too much for him to handle even with the door closed. After seeing the fires dissipate, he cautiously moved back towards the stable and peeked through the opening, seeing the red dragon devouring its meal with such attention.

Having gotten past his awe of actually seeing the first dragon born in over a century, he was in awe of how quickly the dragon named after the Red Queen was growing. Having been fed regular meals for the past three moons, the previous kennel started to become a little tight for the dragon, as it grew past the size of a large dog. So, Sam had the dragon moved to the more spacious stable, but actually getting the dragon to move was not an easy task in itself. Jon, why did you have to go with army? Sam reflected on that difficulty.

Reading through more of the texts that Lord Joon provided to find a solution, whose comprehension was made more difficult since there were certain characters of guanhua that Sam still didn’t understand, he was able to come up with a solution. Opening the door of the kennel, he allowed Meleys to fly out and thus startling the good people of Kushiro. Fortunately, she didn’t burn them and Sam opened the stable to reveal a pile of raw pig and cattle ribs, prompting her to fly in and torch them while the rest closed the table. She wasn’t bothered, as she was too focused on her meal.

He didn’t know exactly how fast a dragon was supposed to grow, despite the knowledge he did have from his earlier studies at Horn Hill. But he figured that should dragons be fed on a daily basis, they would increase in size like any other animal.

On the other hand, he noticed that Meleys was not mindless. She was quite calm while confined to the stable and didn’t hurt just anyone. Sensing that it would be good for the dragon to fly at least once a day, Sam let her out of the stable and saw her fly around the walls of Kushiro, racing through the air at a remarkable speed even for a hatchling. However, she didn’t go burning who she saw as complete strangers, as conventional wisdom said that dragons were very unfriendly with those not carrying the blood of the dragon. In addition, she didn’t just go hunting other people’s livestock for food but only took what was given to her. When she was finished with flying, she returned to the stable and rested.

Meleys makes choices, she thinks before she takes action, and she tolerates the presence of others. On top of that, she flies very fast through the air. Given more time, she’ll be just like her namesake, Sam observed. It shouldn’t have been surprising since even the first Targaryen dragons were recorded as not randomly attacking non-riders, but it was still something to witness personally rather than reading from books.
“Lord Tarly,” he turned around and saw Lady Myung come towards him while speaking guanhua. “Amazing, isn’t it? The dragon.”

Sam nodded in agreement. “Yes, my lady. The dragons have been gone for over a century and I never thought I would see one again.”

“I’ve read about them,” Lady Myung looked at the stable. “Many can’t get over the fact that there are people who can bond with these creatures, since it defies all logic and grants those kinds of people with a certain power. However, not many things in the world make sense and we would be foolish to think that we can bend the fabric of nature to our whims.”

“From those words alone, you seem open to the fact that a Targaryen and his dragon are in your home, despite the risks they both carry,” Sam noted.

“I’ve had six moons to know Jon, or Daeron, and he’s a good boy,” Myung assessed. “But he’s still very unsure of himself and where he belongs in the world, even though that is becoming less of a problem with the revelation of who he really is.”

“He spent most of his life believing that he was a bastard,” Sam responded. “And now, he’s the scion of the family that ruled the lands where I grew up. He’s going to need more time to get used to that.”

“I agree,” Myung looked at Sam straight in the eye. “But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“I did some reading on what your family is known for. Having married a member of a family known for producing well-accomplished generals and imperial officials, I can understand the effects of a legacy on one’s mind. It certainly affected Joon for some years until he learned to cope with it and dug down. Now, he’s one of the ablest administrators and soldiers that the empire currently has,” Myung summarized.

“With respect, Lady Myung, I am aware of Lord Joon’s accomplishments. May I ask what your point is?”

“You come from a family of fighters, men who held a sword called Heartsbane against all enemies for gods know how many centuries. And from what I can observed of you, you are also a fighter. Just not the type to wield weapons,” Myung finally said.

“I’m not following,” Sam wanted more clarification.

“You think that war is the only place where conflicts between men exists? I’ve been to court at Yin and they’re just as savage as any warrior. Steel may not be drawn, but the results from the many schemes there are just as lethal. And you seem like a smart boy. Maybe you can start to convert your knowledge of books into knowledge of people,” Myung suggested.

“Oh, believe me, my lady. I’ve had quite the education from dealing with Quartermaster Shin and Adjutant Dae during my time at headquarters,” Sam stated.

“But they’re only army officers, which provides a limited exposure to politics,” Myung countered. “Then again, we’re not in a place where you can get exposed to the inner workings of court. Perhaps, you can talk to my son and ask him if he can give you something that will give you what you need.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, my lady,” Sam expressed his skepticism. “I have current duties
that involve ensuring that Kushiro obtains maximum income levels and collecting taxes for Lord Seong.”

“As the Lord of Kushiro until my husband returns, he has connections to a number of officials in the province. Minor lords, magistrates, customs agents, and other types of which escapes my mind. My son might think that it’s time you expand your exposure to the province besides collecting coin for our family and for the emperor,” Myung outlined the various options.

“May I ask why you’re telling me this? Why the sudden interest in my education?” Sam wanted to know.

“Because I can understand to some level what you’ve been through, Lord Tarly.”

“How?” Sam asked with some disbelief.

“You think you’re the only one who’s had it very difficult growing up because you didn’t meet expectations?” Myung asked pointedly.

“And what would you know of it?” Sam’s memories of his father belittling him made his voice turn bitter.

“Perhaps we can continue our discussion under more private settings. And it’s almost time for supper, so we can discuss it over some food,” Myung offered.

Almost immediately, Sam’s thoughts turned to what he would eat that evening. “That’s a great idea, my lady.” Lady Myung smiled and gestured him to follow to the dining area, where Seong, Komo, and Karasa were already seated.

Supper consisted of boiled pork, baechi, boiled pieces of cabbage, bowls of rice, and misoshiru. Thanking Lady Myung for the meal, they then dug in. It took a while for Sam to get used to the food in Yi-Ti, as much of it was fermented, but once he did, he began discover flavors and scents that could never be replicated at Horn Hill. It added a certain… aspect to food that Sam never thought existed.

“Different ways of thinking leads to different ways of cooking food,” he thought happily as he swallowed each piece of boiled pork, cabbage, and rice.

“To answer your question, Lord Tarly,” Myung continued as they ate. “I was the daughter of a silk merchant in Leng Yi, which is one of the most important cities in the empire for that. The men in my family were expected to run the business while the women would be responsible for threading the fabrics. I, for one, did not want to relegate myself to that life and for that, my family disowned me.”

Sam was surprised at how open she was at what must’ve been a traumatic experience, and additionally at her family’s reaction to her wishes. “That seems a bit too far, my lady.”

“To you Westerosi, it might be. But the idea of family is taken much more seriously in these lands, since the stability of a family equals harmony with nature and society. One member who doesn’t follow is considered disrupting that harmony and thus must either be reeducated or removed. Guess what my family thought of me?” Myung asked rhetorically.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Sam offered sincerely.

Lady Myung waved it off. “It’s in the past. I had an uncle at court in Yin who took me in, and he invited me to attend court sessions. Learned much over there and that’s where I met my husband.”

“It seemed as if everything turned out for the better,” Sam remarked.
“Eventually. So, I do know what you felt. The point I’m trying to make is that, don’t let others control what you can do. At the same time, find other ways to utilize what your family can do. For me, I found out that weaving together silk cloths was in some way similar to organizing a household and being a second mind to a lord.”

“Why tell me this?”

“Because… I wish I had someone telling me these words when I was younger and this is me trying to be that person,” Myung admitted.

Sam pursed his lips and nodded his head. “Thank you, my lady.”

“You’re welcome,” Myung then turned to Seong. “My son, I believe it’s time to have Lord Tarly have more responsibilities beyond collecting coin.”

“What do you suggest, mother?” Seong drank from the bowl of misoshiru.

“Maybe he could handle the dealings your father currently has with the various village officials before he marched off to war. He could meet with the soldiers recalled to active duty, oversee some aspects of local administration, and ensure that the roads are maintained among other affairs.”

“Hmmm…” Seong thought aloud before he turned to Sam. “Will you able to handle them, Lord Sam?”

“I’ll probably have some struggles at first, but given time, I might get used to them,” Sam answered tentatively.

“That’s not an answer,” Seong shook his head. “It’s a simple yes or no question. Can you can handle them, my lord?”

He immediately recognized that Seong was testing his confidence, causing him to curse to himself silently. *Right. They only want straight answers here, which they think is connected to competence.* Changing his thought process, Sam found the proper answer. “Yes, I can.”

“Better,” Seong put some rice in his mouth. “My father taught me many things, and usually, people who give such long answers usually try to mask their uncertainty in themselves, which makes them useless. My father also taught me persistence, which is quite important amongst educated fools and so-called ‘talented individuals.’”

“I didn’t know that there was such a thing as an educated fool,” Sam chewed on his rice and pork.

“Within a few years, I will study for the examinations. Given my family, it has to be one that allows me to take a commission in the army,” Seong said. “But I learned many practical things from my father, who had me run many of Kushiro’s affairs in his place. I also learned the importance of cooperation, since my sisters,” he gestured to Komo and Karasa. “Were also given responsibilities since they will have to know how to run an estate. What I found was that my acquaintances, those whose families have titles, assumed that their pedigrees and education will be enough to pass the examinations and get good postings in the army, fleet, or at court. But books can only say so much before you have to interact with the world’s realities.”

Sam started to accept that notion. “And because you had responsibilities, you know certain things that your acquaintances don’t, which will be an advantage when the times for your examinations,” he finished for him.
“Exactly. And I kind of have to, because Kushiro will come under my control once my father passes on and all it takes is a single moment of incapacity to undue over a thousand years of the Kitara family,” Seong explained.

Despite the heir to Kushiro being slightly younger than Sam, he admired Lord Seong with how mature he sounded and his already strong sense of duty to his family. At the same time, his father had that same devotion to family and duty and he mistreated Sam for supposedly not having those qualities. *If only he could have seen past my reluctance to hold a sword.*

“So, how about you come into my quarters and we can discuss specifically what you can do besides collecting coin? Is that agreeable to you?” Seong asked him.

“Of course, my lord,” Sam replied with respect.

“Lord Tarly,” Komo joined in. “Can I ask… how you know Jon Snow, or Daeron Targaryen?”

Sam laughed in amusement. “Why do you wish to know, Lady Komo?”

“He has a large white wolf and a red dragon that is growing very quickly,” she answered. “There has to be an interesting story behind that and how you met him.”

“I thought that Lord Joon explained who the Targaryens are and what Jon’s relationship with them is,” Sam drank the misoshiru, allowing its warm broth to slide down his throat and release such comfort to his insides.

“Father told us,” Komo nodded. “But he didn’t say how you and Jon or Daeron became friends.”

“Hmmm,” Sam set down his hashi. “It’s a long story and I need to include all of the details.”

“We’ve got time,” Karasa was also interested, as were Seong and Lady Myung.

Sam then described what House Tarly was and the type of man that was his father. He hesitated before revealing how his father made him go to the Wall, particularly his threat of causing “a hunting accident.” Unsurprisingly, all of them reacted with disgust to Randyll Tarly.

“Some father he is,” Seong said with disdain. “I would never do such a thing to my son if he was in the same position.”

For some reason, it felt… good to Sam to talk about these things to others, especially those who didn’t judge him or put him down. It certainly helped that Lady Myung and Lord Seong had treated him with decency. It was as if the dark stain that was his past was slowly being washed away, allowing him to begin moving forward.

He then continued to when he was actually at the Wall, recounting all of the hardships he faced for being unable to fight before Jon came in and defended him. Komo and Karasa had dreamy looks in their eyes, as the mere thought of Jon defending the weak increased their fascination for him. He pressed onward and talked about Aemon Targaryen, the revelations of Jon’s true heritage, and then Othor being a wight. That last one caused some skepticism from the family.

“Dead men can’t be brought back to life,” Seong was sure of it.

“You don’t have to believe me for what I say on the matter,” Sam answered back. “But the wights coming back is what motivated Lord Commander Mormont to release Benjen from his vows and brought us all the way here. He told us to come back with help.”
“And how do you think you will get help from here?” Seong asked. “Even though your friend has
dragonblood, he has no position of importance in the empire and has no merits to his name. He
can’t just go around the provinces and ask people to join his army as an unknown.”

“That’s what we’re still trying to figure out, my lord,” Sam admitted. “But with all of us taking
responsibilities around the castle and with Lord Benjen in the army, I believe we took small but
important steps. Eventually, we will have to return to Westeros to meet the threat.”

“Why not go to his aunt, this… Daenerys Targaryen? Surely, two with dragonblood working
together is better than one working independently of each other,” Seong posed.

“That won’t work very well,” Sam quickly said. “At this point, Daenerys Targaryen has no army or
any important assets to use should she consider returning to Westeros, just like with Jon. Even if
they do work together, they’ll be facing much hardships without power of their own. It’ll be better
if they became partners from positions of strength and thus actually being of some to use to each
other.”

“In that case, who will have claim to this Iron Throne?” Myung asked. “From what I heard, she
was a khaleesi of the Dothraki and would have had a taste of power. Despite Jon or Daeron having
the senior claim, you really think she’s going to step aside after seeing what having authority can
do?”

“I just hope that when should they meet, their competing claims would not result in another Dance
of the Dragons,” Sam was legitimately worried that might happen.

Myung nodded in understanding, having read about what the Dance did to Westeros. “Well… pray
that their common ancestry would prevent such a catastrophe.”

Sam nodded, having read about the bloodshed that the Targaryens had committed against each
other and knowing that such an outcome would be disastrous for the last two Targaryens in the
world. *If all goes well, those two can return to Westeros and take back the throne together. But
how will they do it?*

As they continued to eat and before Seong Kitara took Sam into his private quarters, they heard
shouting from the courtyard. Curious as to what the ruckus was about, all of them went outside of
the main keep and saw most of the household near the stables, specifically the one with Meleys in
it. There was pounding against the doors and screeches being heard from inside.

“What’s going on?” Seong asked one of the stable keepers.

“I don’t know, my lord. The dragon was not causing any trouble one moment, and then it started to
go crazy and is now trying to break down the door,” the servant explained frantically.

“Dragons are not crazy,” Sam corrected him. “Meleys must be feeling something.”

“How do you know?” Seong inquired.

“I’ve had some time know this dragon. It’s not a mindless beast like some would think and it has a
very strong bond with Jon,” he explained. “Open the stable.”

“And let it burn us all?” the stable keeper cried out in disbelief. “No, I’m not doing that.”

“Then, I’ll do it,” Sam offered. “If you don’t trust me that much, then I’ll show you.”

Seong nodded to the stable keeper, who sighed and shook his head before letting Sam pass him.
Removing the chain on the stable doors, he pulled open the doors and out came Meleys, who immediately flew out of it and away from Kushiro.

Everyone in the castle looked at the direction it flew, northwards, with surprise. “Why did it fly north?”

“Something’s happened,” Sam could only conclude.

“Well, at least that dragon’s gone for the time being,” the stable keeper was relieved. “No more screeching and fires going out of its mouth.”

“Could it be flying to Jon or Daeron?” Seong asked Sam while ignoring the stable keeper’s comments.

“Maybe,” Sam answered. “But why fly now?”

“Let’s wait and see what happens. Everyone else, back to your duties,” Seong addressed the household. “Come on, Lord Tarly. We’ll discuss what responsibilities you’ll have.”

Sam followed Seong back inside the main keep, but his thoughts remained on where Meleys was going and thus where Jon was. *I hope he’s not in any danger*, he hoped.

Night fell as Jon, Chanhee, and Ghost hid in the tall grasses of the plains as they stepped closer to the northern shore of the biggest lake in the Shrinking Sea. They had to drop to the ground constantly since the shores around that lake were crawling with Jogos Nhai on zorseback, all of them armed with a mixture of wide rectangular bronze swords and recurve bows. It was easier to hide in the dark of the plains, even if Ghost’s white fur would have been easily spotted had their enemies actually look closely. *They’re not expecting us. That’s why they’re so slack*, Jon thought.

Ghost led them both to the place where he saw Sumeng Bu, Crown Prince of the Empire. It was a low hill on the outskirts of their camp which nevertheless offered them a commanding view. Scanning through the various tents, their eyes fell upon the largest one, meaning that their jhat lived in that particular one and likely contained the prince.

So far, as it was near the hour of the wolf or whatever time they used in these lands, many were asleep and the fires were dying. *This is probably the only time we can get him.*

“Okay,” Jon finished looking. “So, I count at least three thousand men inside the camp, not including the women and children. All we have to do is move carefully through the tents towards that big one, get the prince, and get out quickly and quietly.”

“I’m surprised that the Jogos Nhai have remained in this place for this long,” Chanhee said. “They usually break up camp by the next day. Why have they stayed here if they want to move further south?”

“We can think about that later,” he brought her back on track. “What do you think is the best way to that tent?”

“I just thought something. Are we really doing this?” Chanhee couldn’t believe what was happening. “My people have been at war with these lot longer than I could remember and I have to be fucking insane to think I will get out of this alive.”

“You are insane,” Jon cracked. “You’d have to be, or you wouldn’t have a Goi bastard going after you because you struck him. Now, any way you see us getting in and getting out quickly?”
“You’re mad,” she jested before looking through the camp and pointing at a certain pathway. “To avoid getting spotted, we’ll have to take a course that is not touched by fires. If we’re in the light of their fires, our chances of being discovered goes up.”

“So, go between the rear of their tents and work our way from there?” Jon saw what she was pointing out.

“Remember, Jon. Slow is fast, and fast is slow. We have to get out quickly, but if we try to rush it, we will make mistakes.” She turned to Ghost. “And I hate to say this, but we can’t bring Ghost in.”

The direwolf looked at Chanhee in apprehension, as did Jon. “Why can’t we bring him?”

“A large direwolf with white fur… they’d have to be blind to not spot him,” Chanhee made her point clear. “Plus, he might scare their zorses, whose noises will alert the rest of them. Any noise we make, and we’ll never get out of that camp alive.”

“But where could he go?”

“He could be outside. Once we get the prince, then Ghost will reunite with us and our horses and we can gallop out of here.”

“But where to? The only place closest to here is Trader Town, but that will probably be their first thought once they see their prize missing.”

“Right,” Chanhee nodded. Then she remember something. “You heard from Lord Joon and other generals that this isn’t all of the Jogos Nhai, but merely those acting because they don’t like the treaty with the empire. Is that right?” Jon nodded. “Then that means that there are some jhats who have remained neutral.”

“Maybe,” Jon acceded.

“Our other option then, besides Trader Town, is to head to lands controlled by these jhats. They might offer us protection, but the more I think about it, the more stupid it sounds,” Chanhee scratched her head in frustration.

Jon and Chanhee could have just went into the camp and grabbed the prince, but without a destination for afterwards, they would get caught and killed, if not worse. Trader Town was their best and most obvious solution, which carried the greatest risk. If not by the Jogos Nhai, the imperial garrison might arrest them both and probably execute them should he be aware of what they did. Trying to remember what he saw from the maps, he remembered that there was a road that goes through that town.

“Chanhee, how about we go to the Steel Road?”

“The Steel Road?”

“Yes, you know that road between Trader Town and Kayakayanaya?” Jon had a hard time saying that last name aloud.

“Ah, that place I do know,” Chanhee recognized. “Did some business over there many years back.”

“Well, the Steel Road is between Trader Town and the Jogos Nhai that are supposedly neutral in the war against the empire,” Jon started. “If we could make it to that road, then either the men aligned with the non-fighting jhats or soldiers from the imperial garrison can pick us up. That’s the best that I come up.”
Chanhee thought about it and then swayed her head to and fro. “Not the best plan, but I got nothing better. When we get to camp, stay behind me, because I know how these types of camps are arranged. Also, unless we really have to, don’t run. We have to go in and out quietly.”

“Of course,” Jon affirmed. Then, Chanhee pecked his lips.

“You’re a mad fucker, Jon,” she jested.

“You’re insane,” he cracked back before turning to Ghost. “Okay, boy. Just stay here and wait for us. We’ll be back,” he assured him before the direwolf licked his face. “You be careful too.”

The two walked slowly and carefully into the camp, making sure to step of the ropes and pegs of each tent while avoiding the entrances. Chanhee had her dao unsheathed while Jon had Longclaw strapped to his back and Dark Sister drawn. He began to appreciate how much speed the blade of Visenya Targaryen granted him, which was only fitting since he was a Targaryen himself. And considering that much of the Jogos Nhai used bronze weapons, he was confident that Valyrian steel would cut through each of their weapons easily. But since they were surrounded by thousands of men who rode on zorseback, he decided not to take any chances.

As they passed by one of the tents, both could hear intense moaning through the fabric. In addition to the shuffling of furs and the sounds of skin slapping on one another, they both didn’t need more to know what was going on. And they looked at each other with embarrassment before moving on.

“Had she not stopped herself, we could’ve done that, but Jon was not going to force it on Chanhee like he repeatedly told her and himself.

They passed by each of the fires, which were dying as the night dragged on, but some were sleeping on the outside and their arms covering their eyes. Jon felt his heart move up his throat, startled to see the Jogos Nhai so up close, and saw Chanhee with a finger over her mouth. Getting the message, he tiptoed around the sleeping men and moved as carefully as possible before catching up with her.

But that was not the end of their problems. They reached the big tent after moving more than cautiously, which had a large amount of open space surrounding it and two guards sleeping by the entrance. There was no way that they could enter the tent without setting off the alarm.

“Any suggestions?” Jon mouthed to Chanhee, not uttering a sound.

Chanhee bit her lip in frustration before she pointed to the tent, specifically its sides. She put her hand, as if to show to Jon the tent side, before getting her other hand to move underneath it. She wants to go underneath the side.

“We have to move fast,” Jon mouthed. “We can’t spend too much time trying to get in and get out.” Chanhee nodded, understanding.

They both tiptoed to the tent, careful not to alert anyone of the sleeping Jogos Nhai in the surrounding tents or the guards at the entrance. Nodding to each other, they pulled up the side flaps and moved into the tent, making sure that there were no objects or other people where they entered.

Quietly, they stood up inside the large tent, which was decorated with furs, decorations, even a wooden chair, before both heard loud snores. Looking to her right and looking to his left, they both saw a large Jogos Nhai in a deep sleep, with what appeared to be a young woman at his side, also asleep. Brushing off their initial surprise, they both looked over the tent again before they saw that they were looking for.
There was a young man tied to one of the tent poles, with his eyes closed in slumber, with his hair untied from its bun, dirtied black and gold silks, his thick boots missing, and dirtied overall.

“Is that the prince?” Chanhee mouthed to Jon. Seeing his nod, she moved slowly and carefully through the furs and behind the prince. She took out her knife and began cutting his bonds. However, the prince shifted as he felt the ropes being undone. Jon’s eyes widened as the prince opened his and saw them both. Before he could say a word, he placed his hand on his mouth and put his finger on his lips, telling him to be quiet.

“You Prince Sumeng Bu?” Jon mustered his best guanhua. The young man nodded. “We’re here to rescue you. Don’t say a word and you’ll be out of here.” Chanhee finished cutting his bonds before both helped him up. Thankfully, he remained quiet while they gestured him to follow.

To their shock, the woman yawned and awoke, shrieking at the two strangers in the tent. The large Jogos Nhai also awoke, but before he could grab his weapons, Jon grabbed the man by his shoulder while sticking Dark Sister against his throat. Meanwhile, Chanhee got control of the woman.

“Make a sound, you will die,” Jon warned him. Unfortunately, he didn’t understand guanhua and pushed him off. Seeing no choice, he swung the Valyrian steel sword down and cut across his chest, making him fall back on the bed while bleeding out.

Before the woman could scream, Chanhee put her hand tightly over her mouth while warning her in the tongue of the Jogos Nhai to keep quiet. Seeing a war club, Jon picked it up and gave it to Sumeng Bu. “Can you handle a weapon?”

“Of course I can,” Sumeng grabbed it from him. “And your guanhua is terrible.”

“You can correct me anytime, but only after we get out of here,” Jon shot back. “Can you be quiet while we sneak past these tents?”

“You sure you can get far enough away from these barbarians before they try to find us?”

“Leave it to us,” Jon nodded to Chanhee, who then got the woman in a chokehold to cut off her air flow. A few moments before the woman closed her eyes and fell to the ground, unconscious. She’s full of surprises, he thought to himself. “Let’s go.”

Going back out the tent the way they came, they continued to sneak past the tents and away from the fires until Chanhee stopped them. “Wait. We need mounts.”

“We’ve got horses back further down the lake,” Jon reminded her.

“Sun will come up in a few hours and we’ll never make it to the Steel Road if we go back to our horses on foot. Plus, he needs one,” she pointed to Sumeng.

Jon knew instantly that she was talking about stealing zorses. He wasn’t going to protest, as there was simply no time. “Can you ride a zorse?” The prince shook his head. “That’s alright. I can’t either.”

“That’s comforting, from a white devil,” Sumeng responded.

Jon grabbed his robe and pulled him closer. “Save your insults for after we get out, or we’ll never. You follow our leads if you want to go home, you got that?”

“Is this how you speak to a prince?” Sumeng asked with surprise at his lack of decorum.
“Long story, which I will tell once we get out of here,” Jon pulled on his robe and dragged him along as Chanhee finally found three zorses all tied to a post. Untying them all, she mounted one while Jon helped Sumeng up before getting his own.

They then spurred the zorses forward, crashing past a few tents before finally going back into the empty plains. Along the way, Ghost met up with them, startling the prince and almost causing him to fall off. Jon helped him recover and they continued westwards.

As dawn approached, the three riders and the white direwolf were still not within sight of the Steel Road. Their sense of urgency had grown after they all saw dozens of Jogos Nhai chasing after them. We’d made too much noise when we tried to leave camp, Jon cursed himself.

They had all stopped by a pond to water the zorses, guessing that they were a good distance away from their camp and they needed to get their bearings. But, they heard gallops and knew that the big-headed zorsemen were on their trail. Ghost might have been able to take them on in a fight, but time was of the essence. If they could reach the Steel Road, they would be safe as either rival Jogos Nhai or imperial patrols would spot them.

All rode hard towards safety, but not fast enough since they were in land their foes knew well. Turning his head around, Jon’s eyes widened in fear as he counted one hundred riders chasing after them.

“Looks like we’ve really pissed them off,” Sumeng noticed as he also turned his around.

“You think?!” Chanhee shouted. “You better be worth the trouble of getting you out.”

“I don’t know who you think you are, woman of the steppes. And I don’t know how you got yourself with a white devil, but I promise you both: if we get back to safety, both of you shall be rewarded beyond your wildest imaginations,” Sumeng swore.

“We’ll keep your word on that,” Jon answered. Then, an arrow flew past him and narrowly missed his ear. It was so close that he could hear it whistling. Turning his head around again, there were Jogos Nhai pulling out their bows.

Seeing what they were doing, Chanhee pulled out her own bow, as her mount had a quiver and bow tied to it, turned around, and released an arrow, taking one down. So this woman is friendly with Ghost, can fight with a sword, can knock out a person without killing them, and can now shoot a bow from horseback? Where has she been all this time? Jon thought in amazement before quickly being brought back to the present situation.

Even though Chanhee proved to be a good shot with the bow, killing one Jogos Nhai rider with each arrow, there was just simply too many of them to get them to stop the chase. Plus, their riders were closing the distance and it was only a matter of time before they caught up with them.

That’s when Jon decided to put Chanhee’s words on him being a “mad fucker” to heart. Pulling out Longclaw while putting Dark Sister in his left hand, he guided the zorse around with his stirrups and turned to face the riders. Ghost, being the loyal direwolf, followed behind despite seeing how insane his bond companion was about to be.

Chanhee saw what Jon was doing and yelled out, “Jon! Get back here!”

Unfortunately, he didn’t hear as the rush started to fill his head. He had never fought on horseback before, nor did he think of using too swords at the same time. However, they were not going to last if they continued to run and he needed to buy time. I’m sorry, Chanhee. I’ll let you thump me if I
get out of this alive.

With Ghost running forward to meet the riders, Jon kept his head low as he held the reins tightly and had his swords sticking out. The Jogos Nhai were momentarily surprised at the white devil daring to challenge them, but they brushed it off and their gallops turned into a charge, yelling out their war cries as their swords were raised and their spears lowered.

Once very near, Jon swung Longclaw backwards before bringing it forward, slashing through a Jogos Nhai’s ribs and making a cut so deep that it severed his main blood vessels and forced him from his zorse. The same happened with Dark Sister, with the same result. Being a lone rider with two swords charging against a group of riders provided plenty of targets for him, as he kept a low profile and avoided counterstrikes.

Valyrian steel cut through the furs and leather like a hot knife to butter, with each swing of the sword resulting in a fallen rider.

As for Ghost, he had jumped onto a Jogos Nhai and crushed his head with his jaws before moving onto the next. Despite the zorsemen’s speed, they were no match for a direwolf that could run faster than them and had more power behind his bite. Several zorses were startled by the direwolf, just like what Chanhee said, and their riders fell to the ground. Ghost didn’t waste time and killed each of them before they were able to get their weapons out. He used his paws to slash across one’s throat while biting down another’s. But before he got separated from his bond companion, he ran to rejoin him.

Jon narrowly missed a spear aimed at his head, having to move to the right side of his horse before switching to the other side to avoid a sword swing. While he got many kills from zorseback, he realized that he couldn’t keep up this charge through the enemy forever. Such realization was emphasized when he had to lean backwards to avoid an arrow, and ducking again to protect against another spear.

Fortunately, he passed through the Jogos Nhai group and was right behind them. He survived the damage he caused and was stunned at how it actually worked. He counted ten to fifteen riders dead, with ten more dead because of Ghost, and the rest just shocked at their audacity. Chanhee was providing as much support as she could with the bow, but that got their attention and some charged towards her. Meanwhile, the prince was just sitting on his zorse and watched the whole thing. Damn it! A prince that doesn’t do anything. I didn’t trade one Joffrey for another.

Seeing the enemy regroup and being to charge towards them, Jon somehow knew that his previous tactic wouldn’t work. Clutching sword tightly, he prepared himself to fight while surrounded. He looked up to the sky and closed his eyes. Father, mother, any gods that can hear me, I need help. Please… protect us. I don’t know if we can get out of this alive. He was obviously afraid of the prospect of death, but he wasn’t going to let these zorsemen take him without a serious fight. The same with Ghost, who bared his fangs out.

Suddenly, a shriek pierced through the morning sky, not belonging to any person at all. Looking up and scanning the skies for what it was, Jon saw a small shape in the distance. It grew larger at a rapid pace and he could see wings flapping. Upon seeing the red scales, he could only say, “Meleys?”

The Jogos Nhai also heard the shriek, but didn’t see what was coming until Meleys swooped down and unleashed her stream of dragonfire. Granted, it wasn’t as powerful as say Balerion the Black Dread or Sunfyre from what he read, but it was enough to set one of the riders and their mount on fire. Living up to her namesake, she flew quite fast for a hatchling and soon, a string of Jogos Nhai and their zorses were incinerated by the dragon’s already potent breath.
Jon looked on in wonder, as man and beast alike had once again agonized under the power of the dragons. *Is this what the Field of Fire was like?*

Seeing their brothers and mounts on fire by a creature they had never seen before and realizing that it would’ve been more costly to go after their prize, the rest of the Jogos Nhai fell back eastwards. As for Jon and Ghost, they went to Chanhee and Sumeng, both of them terrified at what they had just witnessed. Never in their wildest dreams did they see a dragon burning alive corpses as if they were nothing. *Well, Meleys still has a long way to go before she becomes a creature without equal.*

Jon dismounted his zorse and rubbed Ghost’s head in thanks. But before he could move towards Chanhee and Sumeng, Meleys flew down and landed next to him. Straightening her head for her bond companion, Jon slowly reached out his hand before he rubbed her had.

*Did I do good?* he heard her ask.

*You’ve no idea,* Jon said while he continued to Chanhee, with both Ghost and Meleys following him.

Dismounting also, Chanhee walked up to Jon. Just about he was about to hug her, she punched his lower jaw, hard. Jon rubbed his face where she hit while Meleys hissed at her, causing him to put out his hand. *It’s okay. I deserved that. Gods, I knew she packed a punch, but that was something else.*

But just as quickly, she brought him into a tight embrace. “You pull a stunt like that again, I will cave your face in with the biggest rock I can find. I don’t care if you have Ghost or a dragon with you,” she warned.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jon acknowledged before she brought him into a sloppy kiss. That lasted for some moments, with the kiss becoming deeper and deeper before they had to separate for lack of breath and resting their foreheads on each other’s.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your private moment,” Sumeng spoke up. “But who the hell are you?”

“You talking to me?” Jon asked with some annoyance.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

But he was wrong to think that his princely status would protect him, as Jon pulled him down from the zorse and pushed him against the ground. “I’m risking my life here, and so is Chanhee. I expect you to at least show some concern for your survival too and that means fighting alongside us. And you will show us both with respect. You got that?”

Sumeng nodded as Jon pulled him up again. “Why do you have a dragon?” he eyed Meleys.

“It’s in my blood,” Jon replied tersely.

“As I promised, I will see that you two are rewarded. But I must know your names first before I can. And you were right to remind me to be more concerned with my life and to fight alongside you both, white devil. I’m a prince and I must act better,” Sumeng offered in apology.

Jon nodded, accepting. As for Chanhee, she stepped forward. “Well, Prince Sumeng, I am Chanhee of the Chogo tribe.”

Jon kept his swords in view as he also stepped forward. “And I am Daeron, son of Rhaegar of House Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, and Lyanna of House Stark, daughter of Rickard, Lord
of Winterfell and Warden of the North. I am the blood of the dragon and we are not dead.”

Defying Lord Joon’s expectations, Sumeng immediately recognized those names and looked at the dragon, who shrieked in approval of Jon introducing himself by his real name.

“Well, I am glad to make your acquaintance… Your Highness,” Sumeng dipped his head in respect, causing Jon to do the same.

“Your Highness?” In Westeros, royalty were addressed as “Your Grace.”

“I’m a prince and that is how people address me. My father has the special one, being ‘His Augustness.’ But switching topics, where are you taking me?”

“First to Steel Road, and then hoping that some imperial patrols from Trader Town would pick us up,” Jon chose not to tell him of their other option of being found by neutral jhats.

“Well, let’s get there then,” Sumeng mounted his zorse. “I’ll speak with the garrison commander and he’ll let us in. Guaranteed.”

Jon and Chanhee mounted their zorses, with Ghost trailing in the front and Meleys flying about above them.

“So, a scion of House Targaryen? We much to discuss, don’t we, Your Highness?”

Jon was not used to how Sumeng was addressing him, but at least he had the respect to do so despite his earlier moment of cravenness. Knowing how important courtesy was in these lands, he gave a small smile. “Yes, we do, Your Highness.”

“But first, we can start by improving your guanhua. Good for a white devil, but not good enough for these lands.”

“As you say so,” Jon answered as they continued onto the Steel Road, hoping that help would find them. He then looked up to Meleys. Stay close, Meleys. Just as you protected me, I will protect you.

I know you will, he heard her say.

Chapter End Notes

If any of you have doubts about Meleys being large enough to fly a great distance to make that "Big Damn Heroes" moment, understand that Drogon, Viserion, and Rhaegal were born in the Dothraki Sea and their growth was temporarily stumped by the irregular food supply prior to Qarth. Meleys, on the other hand, was regularly fed and was allowed to fly outside the castle, which accelerated her growth. At the same time, I tried to do it within reason by rewatching the Drogon putting to Astapor to flames, back when the show was still very good.

Jon’s single charge against the Jogos Nhai was inspired by the epic battle shown in Mongol (2008), a great movie that showed the rise of Genghis Khan before he became the absolute ruler of the Mongols. I really recommend you all to watch it. And it was quite enjoyable to write that exchange between Chanhee and Jon, calling each other mad and insane. Here, Jon’s using his dragon blood to good use and everyone involved
is a witness.

We also meet Sumeng Bu, Crown Prince of Yi-Ti. He has shades of Joffrey here, but as of now, he's a just a bit more competent and knows how to be grateful, something that our dear blond prince could never understand. Sumeng will be important to the arc from this moment on.

As for Sam, he's now finding people who made him think of life from a different angle, and realizes that strength doesn't have to be from holding a sword or Heartsbane.

All of our main characters so far are taking big steps now.
We Will Meet

Chapter Notes

Hope you all are staying safe. And there's a lot to cover in this chapter, so please read carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daenerys walked with Xaro Xhoan Daxos after he showed her his massive treasure vault and being treated to Qarthean hospitality under his roof. It had been many days since she and what was left of her people, including Ser Jorah, had ventured through the Red Waste with many dying. But what had worried the Mother of Dragons the most were her children, her dragons who she struggled to feed with what little food that they could bring to them.

Drogon, the black dragon and named after her sun and stars, was proving to be most willful of her three children, but he was already proving himself to be Balerion the Black Dread reborn, releasing black fire from his mouth and reminding her of the many stories she had read of the original Balerion and what Aegon the Conqueror did while they were bonded.

Rhaegal, the green dragon and who she named after the brother she had heard so much about, was not as aggressive or willful as Drogon. However, that didn’t mean that he was docile and knew when to stand his ground.

But what really stumped Daenerys was Viserion, the creamy dragon and whom she named after her brother. Calm like Rhaegal, she had assumed at Viserion was a he-dragon, only for her to sense something different from him, or her.

Despite their differing dispositions, Drogon and Rhaegal started to be closer to each other by how they grouped together when feeding upon a carcass and indeed to the now regular supply at Qarth. What convinced Daenerys that Viserion was a she-dragon was how both Drogon and Rhaegal made way for her when she fed and seemed to be keeping their distance, as the she-dragon seemed to be more willful than the boys. From what I read about female dragons, that seems to be only natural, Daenerys mused.

But she would be remiss to forget that there was one other dragon and one other who had her name, and both were further east in a land of a thousand cities and a different people. She didn’t know the name of the red dragon claimed by Daeron Targaryen, but she knew for sure that they were there. What’s more, she wasn’t alone as she previously thought.

As for Daeron Targaryen, hopefully named after the Young Dragon and not the one whose measures had led to the Blackfyre Rebellions, he didn’t have the traditional Valyrian traits of silver hair and amethyst eyes. Still, he looked close to her age and was very comely from the last time they met via that spiritual connection. His chest seemed very well-toned, his shoulders broad, and his well-trimmed raven black beard, black hair, and grey eyes all suited him.

But more importantly, he seemed just as eager as she was in actually meeting her. After all, they were the last two Targaryens that anyone knew about and it was important for them to stick together, especially in the dark times of their house. We will meet, Daeron Targaryen. As much as it takes.
Just the mere thought of there being another Targaryen and another dragon in the world filled her with hope, something that she hadn’t felt ever since Drogo died. And whether by cosmic coincidence or some act of nature balancing itself out, the fact that there were two he-dragons and two she-dragons in the world meant that something larger was at play. It also meant that when, not if, the dragons were united, there was no want in mating pairs.

With all of those thoughts at hand, Daenerys hid her hesitation on Xaro’s marriage proposal, even though his offer of material support for her claim in exchange for her hand did sound tempting for a quick moment. At the same time, she couldn’t afford to jeopardize her position given how she was without a proper khalasar and without a powerful army at her side. *Play the game,* she reminded herself in her thoughts.

After overcoming her elation at the news of how Robert Baratheon the Usurper was skewered by a wild boar and how those that overthrew her family were now killing each other in what was now being called the War of the Five Kings, Daenerys suddenly felt the urge to ask Xaro on what lay east of Qarth.

“Xaro,” Daenerys said once they found a place to change the subject and to get her mind off of his marriage proposal. “What do you know of the land of a thousand cities?”

Xaro’s eyebrow rose. “Why does the Mother of Dragons wish to know of that land?”

Daenerys shrugged, but kept her true intentions hidden. “I’ve heard only whispers and unsubstantiated claims on what lay east of the Bone Mountains. They talk about a civilization that is probably the oldest and most advanced in the world. As we know each other’s positions regarding my claim, I would like you to indulge my curiosity for a moment.”

Xaro chortled before rubbing his chin. “As you wish. Well, where to start? Oh, yes. Whatever you may have heard of the Golden Empire will very likely fall short of grasping its true glory.”

“Such as?” Daenerys’ interest was piqued.

“There have been at least ten dynasties in recorded history to have ever ruled the empire, the azure line being the most recent to take the throne, but there might have been more dynasties, whose names have been forever lost,” Xaro began. “Gai Bu is the current emperor and seventeenth to have hailed from the azure line, and he has sat on the imperial throne for over forty years. It was during his reign that the empire went through its own version of the War of the Five Kings, but his one being amongst three emperors.”

“Hmmm,” Daenerys listened.

“But the azure line was preserved and its rivals, the yellow and orange emperors, were captured and executed for high treason. If you ask me, they were already fighting lost causes when they decided to press their claim on the imperial throne,” Xaro stated.

“Why do you say so?” she asked.

“There are many similarities between Westeros and the Golden Empire, at least from what I read,” Xaro replied. “Both have lordships, the populations in both mainly rely on farming to survive, and both have elite warrior classes among others. But the Golden Empire is a land where the lords are very much inferior to the emperor, who is worshipped like a god there.”

“Please elaborate,” Daenerys pressed.

“Westeros has lords who can command armies of their own and it’s still common for houses there
to defy the rule of the king. But such circumstances do not exist in the Golden Empire, for they have evolved from such an unwieldy system of lords supposedly acting on their ruler’s behalf.”

“How have they evolved?”

“I don’t know when it exactly happened, but one of the emperors decided to end the constant warring between the lords by revoking their right to command their own armies and mandating that every lord send a hostage to the capital every other year to keep them in line. Of course, such an arrangement quickly met resistance and there was a major rebellion in the empire’s southeast province around Jinqi, a rebellion that lasted for ten years. Eventually, that rebellion was put down, Jinqi was devastated, and the lords finally were disarmed and forced to submit to the emperor.”

*Quite an achievement,* Daenerys noted with admiration.

“But some houses in the empire adapted to the new circumstances quicker than others. Their thinking was that if they couldn’t have armies or other means of power in the past, they can find new ways to keep it. So, even though all armies answered to the emperor, many of its officers came from lordly houses and thus keeping the aristocracy prominent in the society. In addition, the conflicts between the lords merely took on a new form and thus continuing the game there.”

Daenerys nodded. *So, some things just stay the same no matter how much one tries to change the established order,* she thought. The lords in Yi-Ti quickly adjusted to new circumstances and maintained their hold above the smallfolk, if such a term applied to the commoners in that land.

“What is the current political situation in Yi-Ti as of this moment?” she inquired.

“Well, you have the emperor Gai Bu and the azure line existing in the House of Bu. The emperor has a trueborn son, Sumeng Bu, as well as other sons born from his concubines. Unfortunately, concubines’ children can never inherit the throne as they do not have the main marriage with the emperor. Unless one of the concubines is elevated and thus her children becomes included in the line of succession, which has happened before but only rarely.”

“Kind of like bastards in Westeros,” Daenerys saw the connection.

“Exactly,” Xaro nodded. “Sumeng Bu is also married to the daughter of Hudam Shu, the prime minister of the empire. Kind of like the Hand of the King, but more powerful. It’s possible that the emperor arranged such a match in order to keep Shu’s faction in line, as it controls over a large portion of the imperial court at Yin. And there are many factions in the court, but Shu’s the only one that can actually maintain some order.”

“It is as you say. The game is played in that land just as often in Westeros,” Daenerys chuckled in amusement.

“Very true. But I would say that an unforeseen player there is the emperor’s daughter, Khiara Bu.”

“Why do you say that?” Daenerys became very interested.

“I’ve only heard rumors about her. Besides being a great beauty like yourself, she is everything that is expected in an emperor, but alas, she is a woman. Compared to his sister, Sumeng Bu doesn’t have what it takes to survive in the court there, which is more of a viper’s nest than the one at the Red Keep can ever be, but he’s only still alive since his death will cause more problems, especially for Hudam Shu.”

“And they don’t regard this… Khiara Bu with much regard because she’s a princess?” Daenerys felt strong sense of familiarity from what she had just heard.
“Let’s just say that… I have more forward views regarding women in power than those snakes in Yin do,” Xaro tried to flatter Daenerys, which didn’t work.

But Daenerys felt the urge to scoff. Of course they would try to cut an able woman out of power. Westeros’ history was littered with tragedies whenever power tried to find its way into a woman’s hand, with the Dance of the Dragons being the most painful example. Why are men’s minds so small and narrow?

“How do you know so much about Yi-Ti, particularly its history and politics?” Daenerys asked.

“I have to admit. I am fascinated of those things by which I have little understanding of,” Xaro honestly answered. “Yi-Ti is a land which I have little exposure, but the little that I become familiar with was enough to intrigue me very much. And besides their capacity for conflict, they are natural philosophers. For example, I learned this saying from one that hailed from there: qiān lǐ zhī xíng, shǐ yú zú xià.”

For some reason, that unknown tongue of Yi-Ti sounded very alluring to Daenerys’ ears. “What tongue is that?”

“Guanhua, which is the tongue of much of the empire and the one spoken at court, although the court dialect is more… how I should say this? Refined than the one commonly uttered. In the common tongue, those words roughly translate to ‘a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,’” Xaro explained.

“Sounds pretty innocuous,” Daenerys didn’t quite understand the meaning of the saying.

“From what I understood, it means that a person’s path to great change only occurs when one actually starts it. And that is easier said than done in most cases.”

“Ah,” Daenerys nodded, now somewhat understanding. “Sounds very appropriate to my situation.”

“Quite,” Xaro agreed. “There is also another saying that they have: rén suàn bù rú tiān suàn. That means in the common tongue, ‘man’s schemes are inferior to those made by heaven.’”

Daenerys shook her head in strong disagreement. “I don’t believe that. Dragons do not answer to both gods and men. No dragons have been seen in the world until I came,” she wisely left out Daeron and his dragon. “We make our own destiny.”

“Then, it wouldn’t be destiny, wouldn’t it?” Xaro asked. “But I see your point.”

“How do you know guanhua?” Daenerys wanted to change the topic, as she was not in the mood to discuss spiritual matters.

“I don’t know much guanhua, to be honest with you,” Xaro shrugged. “And even if I did, it probably won’t be enough for me to survive there, for it is not the only tongue spoken.”

“There’s more than one?”

“Yes. There are three main ones spoken there. Goryeomal is the tongue spoken in the eastern provinces, the ones bordering Asshai, and the empire cannot ignore the descendants of the goryeo people without risking another rebellion from Jinqi, so they made concessions for them to keep their own language and culture in exchange for their loyalty.”

“Makes sense,” Daenerys noted.
“The other important one, nihongo, is the language spoken by the army and their fleet. It was originally the tongue of the nihonjin people, those who lived near the Bone Mountains and were much more martially inclined than the original founders of the Golden Empire. They fought the large armies of the empire to a standstill, so one of the emperors offered them a deal: become his subjects and they shall have the power to reform the army and fleet as they fit.”

Daenerys was surprised that an emperor would make such a deal after warring with those people. “Sounds like the nihonjin got the better end of the deal.”

“And they did,” Xaro bobbed his head. “Their traditions and views towards war continue to influence the empire to this day, with the warrior class living by a strict code of honor, which I believe is more severe than chivalry.”

“In what way?”

“From what I read, if a member of the warrior class dishonored himself, the only way to get it back is to commit seppuku, which means ‘ritual suicide.’”

Daenerys’ eyes widened. “They think committing suicide is a way to get back their honor?”

Xaro raised his hands. “Don’t ask me. Those people have a very different way of viewing the world and I learned long ago to not let my views influence how I see other customs. But going back to Yi-Ti, those three tongues reflect each unique phase of the empire’s history. And how they were able to weave together a united realm is something that I still marvel at.”

“You seem to admire the empire very much,” Daenerys observed.

“It is a land where the people are more forward thinking in every aspect of life, but I’ve learned that greed and the game are circumstances that remain the same everywhere you go,” Xaro said. “Lastly, from what I’ve heard, the army and the fleet very contentious with each other.”

That confused Daenerys. “Why is that?”

“At least in the southern provinces, the army and fleet are engaged in a never-ending struggle to dominate each other at court, mostly because each vie for the largest portion of the imperial purse,” Xaro explained. “The generals in the southern army want to expand northwards and seek more glory and riches onto themselves, but the imperial fleet want more coin to build better ships and eventually expand via the sea. As for the generals in the northern army, they disagree with their southern counterparts because they know that expanding northwards will add unnecessary costs on the imperial treasury and because they know how to deal with the Jogos Nhai through peaceful means. So, in that regard, the northern army generals and the admirals in the imperial fleet have an alliance with each other, while the southern army generals and various officials at the imperial court also have a bond with each other.”

“So, even among those charged with the empire’s security, there is politicking?” Daenerys somehow wasn’t surprised, but it baffled her since these general and admiral were supposed to be fully devoted to safeguarding the citizens. Or that’s not really the case.

“You must understand that their commanders usually come from decent pedigrees, often from families that have had feuds with each other that lasted for centuries at the least. The admirals came from sea merchants who had achieved wealth, power, and titles in the empire, the southern generals came from the original founders of the empire who view themselves as above the rest, and the northern generals came from a mix of nihonjin and steppes people not of Jogos Nhai extract who have become accustomed to the relative harshness of the northern frontier. But my words are
merely simplifications since the feuds between them are much more complex than how I described it. You’ll have to ask someone from there, a person of influence, if you really want to understand all of the empire’s nuances.”

“I see,” Daenerys answered. “So, despite all of its supposed progress, it’s just like any other land in that the people there fight over the same wants and needs?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Xaro accepted. “What I’ve learned from my time gaining all of my wealth is that men everywhere respond to the same desires. You’ll be hard pressed to find one who doesn’t respond to them.”

“Of course,” Daenerys nodded in concurrence, but she also directed her words to Xaro, who also was vulnerable to such base desires such as wealth. Whether he caught it or not was not really her concern, but with their discussion nearing an end, she had decided to retire for the day.

“Did he bring up a marriage proposal to you?” Ser Jorah asked her.

“Yes,” she nodded. “We also had a very interesting discussion on the land of a thousand cities.”

“Yi-Ti?” Jorah was surprised that she even wanted to know about that land.

“Yes, but I had my reasons to make my inquiry on the lands to east, reasons that I didn’t share with Xaro.”

“You’re referring to the other dragon, the one who shares your family name?” Jorah had seen the glimmer of hope in her eyes and who she interacted with via a spiritual connection.

“I know he’s there, Ser Jorah,” Daenerys answered with such certainty. “Drogon felt his and his dragon’s presence, but I also fear for him.”

“Why do you fear for him?”

“Because he’s in a land that’s probably just as dangerous, even more so, as Westeros with all of its squabbling lords and conflicts,” Daenerys admitted. “He’s probably like me, just trying to survive while also not fully aware of the scheming that takes place around him. He must also be worried about his dragon, as it’ll be years before it can grow large enough to be threatening and until then, anyone smart enough will try to use it for their own advantage.”

Jorah sighed before nodding, listening to each of her concerns. But Daenerys sensed something else. “You are doubtful of his existence?”

“With respect, we all vie for the things we want the most and our mind has a special ability to conjure up our deepest hopes in order to make our hard lives more bearable,” Jorah confessed. That got Daenerys angry. “You think I’m lying to you?!”

“I admit that you might have seen someone, but I am skeptical if this man you saw is a Targaryen.”

A fire grew within Daenerys, as she was incensed at her protector expressing doubts on who she talked with through the flames. But before her dragons did something to Ser Jorah, who felt their mother’s frustration and hissed at the knight of Bear Island, she turned around and didn’t face him. “Get out of my chambers.”

“Please, don’t take this the wrong way—”
“Get out!” she shouted. “Before I have my children make you.”

Ser Jorah exhaled noisily before complying with her command. Lying on her bed, Daenerys breathed in and out, calming her ire. She was helped when her children snuggled against her.

“You know that I love you all very much,” she rubbed each of them lovingly, who hissed in response. *We know you do,* she heard Drogon speak through their bond.

While still thinking on what Xaro said about Yi-Ti, her thoughts became focused around on the comely man of her visions. *Be wary, Daeron Targaryen. Don’t let yourself be the fool, like I was.*

Jon, Chanhee, and Sumeng sat in the large yurt alongside other Jogos Nhai jhats. Placed in the center of their circle was a woman jhat going by the name of Sela, who had wooden beads hanging from her head and her hair arranged in various locks. Wearing fur garments and with various animal teeth adorned around her neck, she had wrinkles in her face, but behind her brown eyes bore a mind that seemed just as preceptive and piercing as Lord Joon.

But what got Jon’s attention were the rubies in her cheeks and what seemed to be rings in both of her breasts. Confused as to who she was, since she didn’t look like most Jogos Nhai, he turned to Chanhee.

“I never saw the rubies in other Jogos Nhai before,” Jon said to Chanhee.

“That’s because this woman is from the region that was once the Patrimony of Hyrkoon,” Chanhee replied. “I’m amazed that she was able to become a jhat, considering that most people from there end up as slaves to the Jogos Nhai.”

Jon had studied about the cities that made up the former Patrimony of Hyrkoon, which included the city of Kayakayanaya. Women from that region were raised from an early age to be warriors, as they believed that only those who give birth are permitted to take life at will. Those warrior maids pierced iron rings in their nipples and embedded rubies in their cheeks. And among the activities that they enjoyed included riding horses and training with the bow, knife, sling, and spear. *Arya would love being among them.*

“Thinking of your sister?” Chanhee picked up.

“Yeah,” Jon nodded wistfully. “I’m just thinking about how little I’ve actually seen the world and how Arya might have actually enjoyed being here. Did I tell you that she put on a soldier’s helmet when Robert Baratheon visited Winterfell?”

“You did,” Chanhee grinned. “Your uncle and this Lady Catelyn must’ve been horrified.”

“Well, Ned took it better than Catelyn, who acted as other ladies from the south would act,” Jon rolled his eyes.

“If I met your sister, I would have made her hunt her own food. I’m not going to cook for her,” Chanhee jested.

“I’m going to tell her that you said that. She might actually take you up on it and try to outdo you,” Jon japed back.

“That’ll be something to see,” she chuckled.

“Please excuse,” Sumeng interrupted. “But you both think that this is a good time to exchange jests
with one another? We’re still among these barbarians.”

“At least we’re not bound with ropes and they allowed us to keep our weapons,” Jon pointed out.

“In addition, they extended their hospitality by offering us zorse milk,” Chanhee added while bringing out her knowledge of Jogos Nhai customs. “Once that happens, they can’t harm us and are obligated to protect us from our enemies.”

“That’s comforting,” Sumeng stated sarcastically.

“Would you rather still be a prisoner, Prince Sumeng?” Jon asked him straight.

“A bed in Trader Town is more preferable to living among these savages, Prince Daeron,” Sumeng groaned. “And you said that we might be picked up by patrols from my army.”

“That was one option,” Jon admitted. “But there was no guarantee that there would be patrols where we were on the Steel Road, considering what happened to you.”

Sumeng sniffed his robes before his face twisted in disgust. “I’ll need a bath to shake off the stench of these zorse-fuckers.”

“These ‘zorse-fuckers’ as you like to call us,” Sela turned to Sumeng while speaking good guanhua. “Have just seen evidence of one of the reasons why we dislike you southerners so much. You’ve grown fat like pigs and are perfectly shut off from the hardships of the world.”

While Sumeng was shocked that Sela even spoke guanhua, Chanhee shook her head and Jon cringed at the Crown Prince’s insults.

“I’m not fat,” Sumeng said defensively.

“But the point remains,” Sela shot back. “I dread the day you take the throne, for that will be the end of our fortunes.”

“What can you possibly gain from us? Well, besides the loot and people you take into slavery when you lot raid us,” Sumeng crossed his arms.

“You really don’t understand, do you, Your Highness?” Sela emphasized his address with disdain. “Makes me wonder if you being the firstborn son of the emperor is the only reason why you’re still alive.”

“What did you just say?” Sumeng tightened his fist, causing Jon to grab his arm and shake his head.

“Please enlighten us all on how exactly your people benefits from the empire, for I am a newcomer to these lands,” Jon asked Sela.

“Someone of good blood whose knows manners. Very good,” Sela nodded approvingly before looking back at Sumeng. “If you really believe that the empire has a problem with our raiding your lands, then you are a more naïve fool than I took you for.”

“What are you talking about?” Sumeng narrowed his eyes.

“Your emperor has a large army at his command, more than five hundred thousand. If he really wanted to, he can send all of his soldiers and we won’t be able to last in a protracted war. But as you should know, wars are expensive affairs and these plains are not suitable for farming. At the
same time, it’s better for people who know these lands to rule them and allow us to engage in the occasional raid where some loot of little consequence can be taken. Just so long as the jhats don’t form a large army and begin a major southward advance, which has always ended badly for our people. It’s a lesson that your captors have not taken to heart,” Sela scoffed.

“And what does that make you? The smart ones?” Sumeng sneered. “The Lion of Night will return to these lands before I hear of a Jogos Nhai with a brain.”

“Well, fortunately for you, I’m not actually part of these people,” Sela shook her head.

“If I may ask,” Chanhee joined in. “How did a woman hailing from the former lands of Hyrkoon become a jhat? Warrior women from your lands and the Jogos Nhai have deep blood feuds.”

Sela sighed. “As you might have noticed, I was a slave, taken by a jhat in a raid at Kayakayanaya. But over time, I was able to fight my way up the tribe. The only way that allowed me a chance to survive was to lead a raid against my own hometown, which I did without hesitation.”

Jon and Chanhee were surprised. “You did that against your own people?” she blinked.

“What have the good people of that city did for me when I was enslaved?” Sela shot back bitterly. “Besides, it’s all in the past and I now have my own tribe to lead, or tribes. No Great Father or other man can tell me different.”

Jon had to be impressed. He didn’t know much about Hyrkoon’s women warriors besides from what he read and here was one who made her own fate. However, there was a price to pay for her choices and she must’ve paid in full.

“Well, I’m amazed that someone like you has made it this far,” Chanhee answered in awe, earning a grin from Sela.

One of the other jhats addressed Sela in the tongue of the Jogos Nhai, which Jon didn’t understand. “What are they saying?” he asked while Sumeng leaned in to listen.

“One of the male jhats is asking what they will do with us,” Chanhee translated. “They’re discussing whether to keep us as their guests or turn us over to the imperial garrison at Trader Town after they negotiate with the commander there.”

Sumeng looked really hopeful for that latter option. “If that’s the case, then I shall command whoever is in charge there to pay whatever these people want.”

“That may not be a good idea,” Jon disagreed. “Remember, your Prime Minister doesn’t want the army to negotiate with the Jogos Nhai and they might not tell the difference between the renegades and the ones led by Sela.”

“Besides, who’s to say the commander at Trader Town will even pay what Sela wants?” Chanhee added before she continued to translate. “Now, another jhat is saying that they should meet with Detu, who is the jhat that is leading the others southwards and demand his explanation on why he had broken the truce.”

“Isn’t it because their stormsingers are predicting a winter that will last for generations and thus threaten their livelihood?” Jon remembered.

“It seems as if the jhats led by Sela are a more docile bunch,” Chanhee judged. “They also had stormsingers tell them of a long winter, but their main course is to invade Kayakayanaya and the other cities of the former Hyrkoon patrimony instead of going south.”
“May the Maiden-Made-of-Light make them choose going there,” Sumeng blurted out. “Better have savages killing other savages.”

“You have to be more careful with those words,” Jon scolded him. “Sela knows guanhua and she might not react well if you keep talking down to her.”

Sela groaned in disgust.

“All right,” Chanhee continued to translate. “They’ve decided to send an emissary to Trader Town to contact the garrison commander there. They are going to inform him that the Crown Prince is safe within their hands and that they will be willing to exchange the Crown Prince for food, weapons, and valuables provided that the army grant them safe conduct to the northern provinces until the trade has been made.”

“Finally, some progress,” Sumeng threw his hands up to express his impatience.

“Until then, we shall remain here until they get a response,” Chanhee listened before her eyes widened in surprise.

“What is it?” Jon asked with some concern.

“One of the jhats is asking what they should do with both of us, especially you since you have the dragon,” Chanhee turned her face to his.

“What are they saying?”

“That jhat is suggesting that they could get a bigger payment if you were to be included in the exchange, since they are at least aware of the value behind a dragon,” she responded.

“Well, they got that right,” Sumeng observed. “Your dragon was very fierce. And you are a prince, so the least I can do is treat you like one and ensure that you come back with me to our lines.”

Jon nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Apparently, Sela knows who Lord Joon is,” Chanhee didn’t expect that. “It seems as if he is a more important man in the empire than I had realized.”

“Are you both referring to Joon Kitara, Lord of Kushiro?” Sumeng inquired, to which they both nodded. “How do you know him?”

“She’s been his guest for three moons, me for six moons,” Jon divulged.

“By the gods… why didn’t he say that you were under his roof? He should’ve informed the court of your existence!” Sumeng exclaimed.

“How do you know him?” Chanhee asked back.

“I don’t know him personally, but he had quite the reputation in court at Yin years ago. If there was one man that Prime Minister Shu was concerned about, it was Governor Kitara, as he knew how to make alliances with certain people and actually beat the southern army generals by organizing an official protest with the fleet admirals when my father the emperor was about to introduce certain policies that Lord Kitara had major issues with,” Sumeng elaborated.

“Lord Joon did that?” Jon was astounded.

“Naturally, he made enemies in the court for what he did. Fortunately, since his father had passed
away and the Kitara family were the only ones who could really administer the northwest region for the emperor, he was appointed the governor like his father before him and thus left court before anyone could retaliate against him,” Sumeng was impressed.

“Good timing,” Jon noted.

“Quite. Now, I shall have words with Lord Kitara on why he didn’t inform the court on your existence,” Sumeng declared. “A dragon, a prince of House Targaryen, is not something to hide.”

“He told me that the Targaryen name has no meaning in the empire and that even if someone knew it, no difference could be made,” Jon answered.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” Sumeng cracked a smile.

Sela turned back to the three, who sat straighter. “I have deliberated with the other jhats and we’ve agreed to turn you all over to the imperial army at Trader Town provided they meet our terms and issue safe conduct to us while we’re there. Until we hear a response or meet a representative, you will all remain here for the time being. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Chanhee spoke for them in the tongue of the Jogos Nhai. “We look forward to more of your hospitality.”

Sela nodded before gesturing them to follow one of the zorsemen to their respective yurts. But before they could leave, she called out to Jon. “Prince Daeron, can you spare a moment?”

Sumeng and Chanhee looked on, stumped, before Jon assured her that he will be fine. Chanhee gave him a kiss before walking on. “Yes?”

“You’re a good-looking man, even for a white devil,” Sela looked at him up and down.

“Thank you,” Jon accepted.

“And your woman, Chanhee, is a pretty one,” Sela added.

“She is,” Jon agreed.

“You’ve bedded each other yet?” Jon shook his head. “Why not?”

“She didn’t want to be rushed and I respect her wishes,” Jon answered.

“If I were you, I’d get on her,” Sela chuckled. “And I’m pretty sure that she wants to also. After all, you’ve both been through some challenging trials by this point.”

“You really think so? About Chanhee?”

Sela shook her head. “If you really want to find love in your life, you have to take it. Don’t wait for it.”

“May I ask why are you concerned about my personal affairs?” Jon had to ask.

“Just a suggestion,” Sela shrugged. “But I wouldn’t wait too long, young man. Or boy, since you’re not considered a man until you take a woman into your arms.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” Jon bowed his head before showing himself out of her yurt.

But as Jon walked back to his yurt, he began to think on Sela’s words and how his bond with
Chanhee had gone. There was that one moment in the plains where they also did it, but they both weren’t ready. However, after what they’ve been through, with Meleys setting their pursuers on fire and him getting his first real taste of combat, he began to see that they were already living a life that no one else had. They also had brushed very close to danger, which could end their lives before both of them knew it.

That was when Jon decided to really ask Chanhee if they could do it. *Our lives might end tomorrow, so we should know. But if she still doesn’t want it, I’ll respect it.*

Going to Chanhee’s yurt, he took in a few deep breaths before he told her that he was outside.

“Um, Chanhee,” Jon called out. “I have something to ask you.” But just as he finished his sentence, a hand grabbed his and pulled Jon in.

Chanhee tackled Jon to the floor before forcibly kissing his lips. Their tongues danced as they spun around on the furs of her yurt. Seeing herself on top of Jon again, she pulled away from the kiss. “I want you, Jon. I think I’ve waited long enough.”

“You sure?” Jon wanted her also, but he had to be sure.

“We’ve pushed past death so many times, but we might die tomorrow. I want to know what it’s like to be in your arms before that happens.”

Jon smiled. “I’m glad we have the same thoughts. But don’t talk about dying. I like you very much, Chanhee.”

“I like you too,” she chuckled while nuzzling his nose with hers. “But please, let’s have this night together.”

“As you wish,” Jon complied pulled her into a kiss again.

Chanhee pulled open Jon’s furs and robes as Jon hiked up hers to expose her intimate places. She had heard about what a man and woman do in bed, but this was the first that they were doing it and he was just exploring.

As if helping Jon after she made his chest bare to her lusty eyes, Chanhee sat back up, pulled down her robes and furs, and exposing her chest and breasts to his gaze. Seeing how he stared at him, she smirked as she pulled down his pants, grabbed his length, and took it in her mouth. *She has a slim body but big breasts. How?* His mind was baffled at how she looked.

Fisting the furs in his hands, Jon gritted his teeth, but more out of pleasure once the initial pain went away. *Was this how it supposed to feel?* His mind was too overwhelmed by the feeling that came with having a woman do what Chanhee was doing, but she was doing it so well that he doubted that he was the first man that she was with.

But he could reflect more, she straddled his waist and leaned down to kiss him while she guided his cock to her entrance, moaning in his mouth as she felt him go deeper inside her. She felt Jon’s breath hitch and she leaned back up and further impaled herself on him. Her eyes were closed tightly and she bit her lip, as ecstasy flowed through her and her partner in the yurt.

Jon moved to sit up and bring her closer, but she pushed him back down. Wanting more, Chanhee took his hands and put them over her breasts, happily exhaling as she felt his hands squeeze them and seeing his eyes nearly roll in pleasure. The wet slaps of skin, heavy moans, and the shuffling of the furs soon filled the yurt, the new couple lost in each other’s bodies as they took the natural next step. What felt like hours had passed and Jon could feel himself approaching the edge, as was
Chanhee. Before they went over it, she pulled Jon up to her, hugging him tightly and wanting to take him with her.

Then, Chanhee felt Jon gush inside her with a sharp inhale, pleasure spreading throughout her body before collapsing onto him, her black hair spread all over his chest. Pecking his neck and lips, she slid off him before snuggling against him on his right side. She smiled when Jon kissed her forehead and wrapped his arms wrapped around her tightly, hearing his sigh of happiness. Minutes passed before she had the strength to lean up to look at him.

“How was it?”

“No words can describe it,” Jon answered with a smile. “How did you learn how to do that?”

Chanhee sighed, as dark memories came to her. “As I said, it’s a hard life on the steppes. And all of us had to do whatever it took to stay alive.”

From how she was describing it, Jon wisely decided not to ask. So, I might not be the first man she was with, but her first might not have had her consent. Coming to that realization, Jon pulled her closer to him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jon assured her. “What matters is that we’re here, now, in this tent.”

“Yes, it does,” Chanhee buried her head against his neck. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” Jon kissed her forehead again.

“Maybe, we’ll do this again if time allows?”

Jon sighed before nodding. “I’d like that.”

Chanhee kissed his jawline before resting her head on his shoulder and fell asleep. As for Jon, he also slipped into the waiting arms of sleep, but his last thoughts before entering the raw infiniteness of dreams were on his aunt Daenerys and what she was doing right now. Stay safe, Aunt Daenerys. We will meet, even if it takes all of me.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I did the love scene between Jon and Chanhee well. While we all know who'll end up with who in the end, this is important because now Jon is beginning to learn how to please a lady. And that'll be important when he finally meets the one he should be with.

I also hope I covered all of the history and politics of Yi-Ti well. While it is an advanced society, people there are also schemers like the ones at the Red Keep and greed and hunger for power are universal, which is true of our society. As I said, a lot of the influence for Yi-Ti comes from Ming China, Joseon Korea, and pre-industrial Japan, specifically the conflicts between Satsuma and Choshu (which lasted until the end of the Japanese empire) and decades before the transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty. The game of thrones is as alive in Yi-Ti as it is in Westeros, although under a different name, involving different factions, and under different contexts.

Also, the Jogos Nhai, unlike the wildlings, are experienced political players and are
aware of the benefits of the empire not marching on them even though it is largely unsaid. Also, Sela the Hyrkoon woman is a bit of a parallel to Daenerys, as both were taken by nomads and had to work their way up (also, responding to a reader's request of including a Hyrkook woman, which we'll see a little more of).

One last thing. I've decided to make Viserion a girl because that'll even out the dragons between the boys (Drogon and Rhaegal) and the girls (Meleys and Viserion). That way, they can become mating partners and bring about the next generation of dragons. I hope that that is an acceptable decision.

Just remembered that yesterday was the anniversary of "The Bells", the travesty of Game of Thrones. This, along with others, helps me cope with how Dumb and Dumber ripped such a good show to shreds. Hope this also works for you all in healing the wounds that HBO failed to prevent.
A Plot and a Lesson

Chapter Notes

Hope you all are continuing to stay safe and patient. We can do this together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Joon sat in the main hall of the imperial garrison headquarters of Trader Town. As Captain-General of the Northwest Imperial Army, Trader Town’s garrison was under his jurisdiction and so naturally, its commander, Major-General Ikken Feng, had to send weekly reports via courier to his army’s headquarters near Kushiro before sending it to his command tent.

So when General Feng informed him that Sela the Hyrkoon, one of the most powerful jhats in the Plains of the Jogos Nhai, had sent an emissary to Trader Town and informed him that she was in possession of Crown Prince Sumeng Bu, Prince Daeron Targaryen, and a Chogo woman by the name of Chanhee, Joon had sent Quartermaster Shin to the city to corroborate Feng’s report. A week later, Shin sent a special courier to his command tent and confirmed that the emissary’s words rang true after he correctly answered certain questions about the Crown Prince, Daeron or Jon, and Chanhee regarding their appearance and age. What’s more, the emissary described Jon’s direwolf Ghost in great detail and also talked about a certain red dragon that grew bigger by the day after consuming many animal carcasses.

Wait a moment. What’s Meleys doing that far north? But Joon quickly remembered that dragons had a strong bond with their riders and would sense whenever they were in danger, at least from what he had read. If she can fly that far and if the words on her growth are true, then I’ve just housed a powerful dragon under my roof.

Meleys was a particular cause for concern from how quickly she had grown at Kushiro. Joon had to admit that Jon had picked a fitting name for the red dragon, as Meleys of old was very fast and very cunning, both of which the new Meleys began to show. At the same time, he also understood that he couldn’t hide the dragon, but he wanted to reveal its existence at a proper time. The emissary informing General Feng and then Quartermaster Shin of the dragon’s existence took control of the situation away from him.

But instead of worrying over a matter that was no longer under his control, Joon thought of ways he could adapt accordingly. After all, the key reason why the Kitara family became the most powerful house in the northwest region was because his ancestor saw no point in fighting the emperor in a losing battle and thus submitted in exchange for power. The result was the Kitara family becoming quite important in maintaining the entire northern frontier of the empire, since their submission allowed every Kitara to become indispensable as soldiers and at court over the generations.

If the officers should ask on who is Daeron Targaryen, I will tell them, but only the parts that they need to know and nothing more. Better to seize control of the narrative than let others influence it without you, he concluded.

Once Quartermaster Shin confirmed the emissary’s message, Joon took half of the army up the Sand Road from Tiquir to Trader Town, a journey that took another week. But once there, he wasted no time in getting settled and appraised all of the daily matters in the empire’s northernmost
city.

“General Kitara, may I say that it is an honor for—” Feng bowed to him before Joon cut him off and turned to Quartermaster Shin, who also greeted him.

“Stow that, General Feng. Is the emissary still here?”

“Yes, general,” Shin confirmed. “I can have him ready to speak to you as soon as possible.”

“Do that,” Joon ordered. “I must hear his words myself.”

The big-headed Jogos Nhai, offered a cup of tea on Joon’s orders, told him again on the current condition of the Crown Prince, Daeron, and Chanhee. “And the leader of the renegades, who is he?”

“His name is Detu, my lord,” the emissary answered. “He was once a former ally of my jhat, but he only got to his position through usurpation. He sees the coming winter as a threat to his hold over the other jhats that came with him, so this is his way of guaranteeing his power by focusing their energies on war.”

Joon groaned while rubbing his forehead in annoyance. Too many times had he heard this sort of story, with the young man in an unstable leadership position suddenly making war in order to prove his capability. This is seriously getting old.

“And what plans does Sela the Hyrkoon have for this Detu? Renegade or not, your people violated the truce with the empire. Even if you do have the Crown Prince under your current protection, someone has to answer for this breach,” Joon explained.

“Sela expected you to have such concerns, my lord. She told me to say, ‘The jhats under me have decided to denounce the actions of Detu and judge him as unfit to lead a part of our people in the future while reflecting his deeds as unrepresentative of the Jogos Nhai. Whether he dies by betrayal or is killed by imperial troops is no longer our concern,’” the emissary relayed Sela’s message.

“I’m afraid that it will take more than your jhat’s message to reassure the emperor and the court at Yin of the good faith she professes to have,” Joon shook his head.

“I don’t have the power to discuss, on Sela’s behalf, on what to do with Detu at the moment,” the emissary told him. “However, I do have her leave to elaborate on the details of our exchange. I trust that you have read Sela’s offer.”

“I have,” Joon nodded. “But I trust you know that the Prime Minister has forbidden us from negotiating with you lot. In fact, I’m disobeying orders just by talking with you.”

“Then why have you come here, my lord?” the emissary asked.

“‘When you engage in actual fighting, if victory is long in coming, then men’s weapons will grow dull and their ardor will be damped,’” Joon quoted the general he had studied.

Unfortunately, the emissary didn’t know what he was talking about. “I’m sorry?”

“What those words mean is that the longer a war is being waged, the greater the exhaustion,” Joon said in simpler terms that even the emissary would understand. “My family have protected the northern frontier for many generations, and we know that the most effective way of fighting you involves as little actual combat between us as possible. Wars cost money and effort, which cuts both ways.”
“I agree,” the emissary nodded. “Unlike Detu, Sela is well-aware that her tribe cannot hope to last in a long war with the empire and desires the maintaining of peace between our peoples.”

“Which brings me to what exactly does Sela want in return for the safe return of the Crown Prince, Daeron Targaryen, and Chanhee,” Joon brought the discussion back on topic. “As I said, I am disobeying orders despite the fact that I have a relatively painless way to resolve this crisis right here, so you better make it worth my time.”

“As you wish,” the emissary adjusted himself on the mat. “Sela’s stormsinger predicts a long winter, which the rest on the plains have also said. To ensure the survival of her tribe, she desires portions of your harvest and livestock to last her at least four years and twenty-five thousand silver taels to pay for more supplies.”

Quartermaster Shin wrote the offer down while General Feng scoffed. “I knew it. You people are looking for coin, but you don’t steal it like you lot usually do.”

Joon gave a scolding look to General Feng, who cowered under his cold stare. “And that will be enough to ensure the safe return of Prince Sumeng, Daeron Targaryen, and the Chogo woman?”

“I’m afraid those terms would only apply to the Crown Prince, with the Chogo woman being thrown in without terms,” the emissary waved his hand dismissively at the mention of Chanhee. “For Prince Daeron, there are other conditions to be met.”

Joon’s face slumped. “What other terms do you seek?”

“As we’re dealing with someone who can control an actual dragon, which has already been used to deadly effect, Prince Daeron is an asset that would require a large payment to be made before we can release him into your custody,” the emissary made clear.

“Spare me the explanations, zorsemen. What is the term?” Joon was getting impatient.

“Sela would like an addition twenty-five thousand silver taels for his release. In addition, she would like to trade furs for some of your tanegashima.”

Shin stopped writing while Feng slammed his hand on the floor. “Impossible!” he shouted. “We will never give you such weapons and make you more dangerous than you already are.”

“Selling black powder weapons without license from the emperor is punishable by death,” Joon added. “With your jhat asking for fifty thousand silver taels, which is more than what any jhat ever obtained, her condition of wielding tanegashima unfortunately cannot be met.”

“Then, you can have the Crown Prince and the Chogo woman while Prince Daeron shall continue to enjoy our hospitality until you change your minds,” the emissary shrugged.

Joon scoffed. *Do you not understand what dragons really are?* “If you think that you can hold a dragon, including an actual one, against its will, then you are gravely mistaken.”

“What are you talking about?”

“See, this was one of the benefits of having a proper education, zorseman,” Joon leaned slightly forward. “You can look down on ‘southerners’ as much as you want, but one of the things that I appreciate of the empire is that we have access to a wealth of knowledge, including scrolls that talk about when dragons ruled much of the lands west of the Bone Mountains.”

“I’ve heard talk of old Valyria,” the emissary tried to stand his ground, but he was quickly
outmatched by the Lord of Kushiro.

“You’ve heard talk, but you don’t have actual knowledge,” Joon pointed out. “Dragons are bonded to their riders for life and over time, they understand each other’s feelings and thoughts. This was why Valyrians are so highly regarded because they could control the only creatures in the known world that could unleash fire but also proved that the dragons are not mindless beasts. This isn’t hearsay. Their bonds are well-documented in recorded history.”

“And?”

Joon shook his head disapprovingly before continuing. “You currently have the only Valyrian and only dragon on this side of the Bone Mountains. And I can assure that you that Daeron Targaryen might be young, but he’s not stupid. The moment he senses something off, what do you think he will do? What do you think his dragon will do?”

The emissary kept silent but was starting to get worried. “His dragon will fly up into the air, swoop down, and burn all of your tents, all of your mounts, all of your food, and your entire families in order to protect her rider. And she doesn’t have to worry about hurting Daeron, as he cannot even be hurt with fire.”

“How is that possible?” the emissary became more uneasy, prompting Joon to stand up and walk slowly towards him.

“It is a known fact that some from his family, House Targaryen, had the ability to not be harmed by fire. They call it being ‘unburnt.’ With her rider having that trait, his dragon can burn you all indiscriminately if you try to do anything detrimental to him.” The emissary gulped but looked as if he was standing his ground. “But if a dragon is not enough to cause you anxiety, then I trust you have his seen direwolf.”

“You mean the big white wolf?”

“They’re called direwolves and just like his dragon, it will kill you if you even make its bond companion, Daeron in this case, notice something wrong. Now, if being burnt alive doesn’t scare you, perhaps you prefer having your throat slashed with his paws and your skull crushed in his jaws. Like so!” Suddenly, Joon grabbed the emissary by his head, stood him up, and began squeezing the sides by pressing hard with his thumbs on the Jogos Nhai’s temples.

The emissary, not expecting an aged southern lord to be so belligerent, was unpleasantly surprised at how strong the Lord of Kushiro turned out to be despite his unassuming frame. He tried to push Joon’s hands away from his head, but found that his grip was too strong and he quickly became more than uncomfortable from how the pressure his skull was getting.

“Let go!” the emissary begged, while Quartermaster Shin and General Feng were shocked at how ferocious their commander really was.

“Whether from his dragon or his direwolf, you and your ilk will be dead!” Joon showed his teeth. “The question is, which one do you prefer?” After another moment and seeing that the emissary had enough, he let him go but pushed his head away from him, causing the Jogos Nhai to fall flat on the floor. “I suggest you think again on burdening us unnecessarily, considering what creatures are with Daeron at the moment.”

“What do you have in mind, my lord?” the emissary stood back up.

“No extra tael and no black powder weapons. You’ve already asked us to meet terms that we have
“never made to your people before, but you let your greed overstep your bounds,” Joon adjusted his robes while speaking in a calm tone again.

“Sela will not like what has happened today, my lord.”

“And that’s her choice but remember my words. I wouldn’t give Daeron any reason to suspect you, as that will lead to the fatal consequences that I had just spelled out. Best to release the three of them with as little trouble on both sides as possible,” Joon said.

“But I can’t go back without an offer from you, my lord.”

“Tell Sela that we are prepared to give fifteen thousand silver taels and two years’ worth of food to her tribe. As she must come down her herself, I will issue safe conduct to her and whoever she brings to oversee the exchange,” Joon offered.

“Sela might protest that, my lord.”

“The most I am willing to offer is seventeen thousand and five hundred silver taels along with two years and two moons’ worth of harvest and livestock. That’s the best offer she can get,” Joon answered quickly.

“I will let her know of your offer, my lord,” the emissary bowed his head. “If or when she decides to accept, she will come to Trader Town. Will we have safe conduct then?”

“Yes,” Joon nodded his head. “You have my word as the Governor of the Northwest Province.”

“Sela knows of your reputation, my lord. I’m sure she will come,” the emissary bowed lower before exiting the main hall.

“General,” General Feng stood up in protest. “You’re not actually going to pay them what they want?”

“Maintain discipline, General Feng,” Joon turned to him which admonishing him, causing the garrison commander to stand straight at attention. “We’ve already shown again that we can beat the Jogos Nhai on their own ground and from what I’ve heard of Sela the Hyrkoon, she’s not stupid to think that she can resist us indefinitely. She’ll take what she’s offered.”

“General, I must caution against this,” Quartermaster Shin stood up. “The prime minister’s orders were clear. If you do this, you might get yourself in trouble.”

“I know, quartermaster. However, given that we already beaten the renegades and that we’re dealing with neutral jhats who are more reasonable, you think the court and the emperor will complain when the Crown Prince is delivered safely into our hands?”

“At the same time, general, the prime minister will not forget that you disregarded his orders. He might come after you,” Shin added.

“Leave the politics to me, quartermaster. As for you, I suggest you look through the treasury in this city. I’m sure that the amount I offered is but a drop in the bucket,” Joon told Shin.

“In addition, you had the provosts sent out to arrest Daeron and the Chogo woman,” Shin pointed out. “Aren’t you contradicting your own orders, general?”

“This is a very fluid situation, quartermaster. We have to keep all of our options open. Because of me, the emissary will now go back to his jhat with a reduced offer and with warnings of what
might happen should they try to do anything against Daeron Targaryen. If the Crown Prince returns, that’ll be the only thing that matters. If Sela tries to do anything to rouse his suspicions, his dragon and wolf will kill them for us, and we won’t have to pay anything. There are many ways that we can benefit from this. As for Daeron and Chanhee, if what Sela says is true, then we’d be in a complicated situation should we arrest the Crown Prince’s rescuers,” Joon outlined.

“Now that we’re talking about the dragon, why did you keep it hidden?”

“I have my reasons, quartermaster.”

“A dragon is not something that you can just conceal. The court will make you answer for that.”

“As I said, leave the politics to me. I gave you a task and I want you to fulfill it,” Joon pointed to the exit of the main hall. Shin hesitated before nodding and leaving the main hall.

“You actually going to give them what they want?” Feng exclaimed.

“Not what they want,” Joon corrected him. “They asked for a total of fifty thousand silver taels, four years of food, and black powder weapons. I got it down to less than half of that, two years’ worth of food, and no tanegashima after scaring the emissary, so you can’t say that I’m giving them what they want.”

“I have strong reservations of your actions, general,” Feng protested. “This could set a dangerous precedent.”

“Possibly,” Joon admitted. “However, I wouldn’t be so worried. Once the Crown Prince returns, there’ll be rewards for all, including for you.”

“For me?” Feng pointed to himself.

“I remember how you ended up here, Feng,” Joon crossed his arms. “You pursued the wrong woman and they sent you to this place as punishment. It’s doubtful that you will progress higher than where you are now.”

Feng gritted his teeth, his fragile ego threatened by the memory of how he was denied a woman because of his commoner status.

“If you help me, you might be rewarded. If you don’t, you’ll be stuck here. It’s simple as that.”

“But general, consorting with these zorse-fuckers?”

“Of course, you would prefer to continue fighting with your brawn, not your brains,” Joon sighed. “If you choose that path, I can’t change it. I don’t like these zorse-fuckers any more than you, but would you rather fight a short war and come home unscathed or a long one and maybe die needlessly?”

“Who said anything about dying? And I’m not afraid of death,” Feng answered.

“I thought so. But why choose honor in death if there were other options to follow? Fight smart, not hard,” Joon finished before proceeding to leave the main hall. “We shall continue this tomorrow. I’m sure the emissary will bring a response soon.”

Later that night, Feng had dinner in his quarters. But that night was important, as he was meeting an acquaintance from Tiqui. What made this acquaintance different from the others was that he was a magistrate and might help in his current quandary regarding Lord Joon’s plans. He’s too
powerful and too cunning, so I need someone else, he thought as he still had unease with his consorting with the Jogos Nhai. But what made him angry was how Lord Joon brought up his past and thus reopening old wounds. Men like the governor can do whatever they want, but men like me will always be beneath them. But time to show them that sometimes, we can bite back.

The magistrate, still fat and bald from when he last saw him, enjoyed the arakju, the rice, the beef, the pork, and the other dishes that had decorated the table. But since he was an imperial official, Feng had to pay for his company. He slid across a small pouch of silver taels, a hundred, to the magistrate. Opening it, the magistrate smiled, closed it again, and put it in his robes.

“What can I do for you, General Feng?” the magistrate asked.

“I have a certain problem, a problem I believe will be of interest to you.”

“I’m listening,” the magistrate cocked his head.

“I understand that a white devil embarrassed you six moons ago. Did he have a white wolf with him?”

That got his attention. “How would you know that?”

“I can tell you where he is, provided that you meet my terms.”

“And what terms would they be?” the magistrate inquired.

“A way to damage General Kitara’s reputation permanently and get me promoted,” Feng quickly said.

The magistrate smiled. “Of course. I’ve been longing to hit back at the governor for sheltering his white devils.”

“Then we are in agreement?” Feng asked hopefully.

“First, tell me where that wolf boy is and if the Chogo whore is with him. I’ve already posted a bounty on his head, but I am prepared to let you have a share, in addition to the other terms you gave me,” the magistrate offered.

Feng thought through his options before nodding. “He’s with the jhat called Sela the Hyrkoon. They have the Crown Prince with them also.”

“You lie,” the magistrate called out in disbelief.

“I might be an officer who can’t be promoted anymore, but I don’t lie,” Feng responded defensively.

The magistrate took a moment to also think. “And am I correct to think that Governor Kitara is planning an exchange?” Feng nodded. “If I had some Goi sabotage it and violate the safe conduct that he’ll probably issue, then I can kill that wolf boy, that Chogo whore, and rescue the Crown Prince myself.” He bobbed his head excitedly. “I like it.”

“And I have your world that you’ll help me?” Feng asked again.

“Of course,” the magistrate raised his cup of arakju, which Feng responded with raising his own.

Best not tell him about the dragon. I don’t believe it exists, but it might complicate matters for me, especially my reward, Feng thought as they drank to their deal.
Jon pushed an antelope carcass to both Meleys and Ghost, after he skinned and field-dressed it. Meleys went for the neck and back while Ghost chewed on the legs, although the direwolf had to avoid the flames. Fortunately, she knew how to be careful with her breath and thus avoided her companion’s other bonded creature.

It amazed Jon at how… tolerant these two were of their presences. Ghost wasn’t afraid of Meleys, but she was making clear that she didn’t have much to fear from the direwolf either. While the dragon could incinerate her prey in an instant, the direwolf could savor the process of a kill and could see his work. But as they were both bonded to the same person, they decided to get used to each other even though they had a lot to work on before they had a working relationship.

Appreciating both of their efforts they were making for his sake, Jon rubbed Ghost’s head and ran his hand down Meleys’ spines, which made his direwolf lick his hands and his dragon creaking gratefully. “Thanks, you two,” Jon said to them both. “We’ll get through this.”

Earlier that day, Sela invited Jon, Chanhee, and Sumeng to go on the hunt with them. Of course, Sumeng elected to stay in his yurt and continue drinking whatever spirits that they had, which he described as “tasting like zorse piss.” As if you’d know what that tastes like, Jon shook his head. Sela took a long look at Jon as they mounted their zorses, and he knew that she knew that he had bedded Chanhee.

“Good,” Sela slapped his back, hard. “You’re now a man.”

“I don’t know if me bedding Chanhee makes me a full man,” Jon was still unsure.

“You don’t understand,” Sela said. “Lots of things can come from when you hold a woman in your arms. For example, you know what pleasures her the most and you know the tricks a woman is capable of doing in order to ensnare you.”

Jon didn’t expect to hear that. “Tricks?”

“Not many people will experience this, but you’ll find a someone who might claim to love you and will do anything to prove that. And behind it all, he or she wants something from you. Usually, their wants are based on material needs, or maybe just you.”

“Why just me?” Jon asked.

“For your case, you can control a dragon. You don’t think that many people won’t try to use you for their own ends? Their need to use you can take the form of obsession, lust, or a focused goal on controlling what you already have,” Sela outlined.

“How would you know that?”

“I met a woman like that, back in Kayakayanaya,” Sela sighed sadly. “I thought we had… something special. But when I came to raid that city, she took everything that I had there while I became a forgotten memory. So, I cut off her head, tied it to my zorse’s tail, and let her skull know what it’s like to experience shit.”

Jon was taken aback. “I’m sorry that happened to you,” he merely offered.

“Don’t be. It’s all in the past and I became stronger. Now, no one can hurt me anymore,” Sela answered before getting out her bow. “Let’s get some supper,” she then urged her horse on.

They spent all day tracking and hunting the few antelopes that they could find near their camp.
Naturally, they were incredibly hard to catch, as the only other animal that could provide meat was the zorse and that was a line that the Jogos Nhai would never cross unless in dire straits. The antelopes were fast and nimble, able to maintain a quick pace for miles and easily maneuver their way through many zorsemen. At the same time, it made the hunt all the more worth it, as sometimes the things that one needed to keep moving required one’s all.

Jon couldn’t use the bow, so Sela gave him a spear to use alongside Longclaw and Dark Sister. After hours of exhaustive riding in the fairly desolate steppes, he finally got close enough to an antelope to stick it with his spear. Seeing it wounded, he dismounted, ran to the animal, and claimed his kill by unsheathing Dark Sister and stabbing where the heart should be. His trips in the wolfswood with Ned Stark taught Jon how to hunt, but this was probably the most difficult he had been on.

They made it back to camp by nightfall, where they feasted on their catch, totaling four antelopes. Jon wondered if either Meleys or Ghost would have made their task easier, only for Sela to say that Ghost had white fur and could easily be spotted by the antelope’s trained eyes while the Meleys would simply scare any animal near her. She also said that getting four antelopes was considered a very good day on the plains, as those animals were incredibly hard to catch and would last them a moon if the tribe was careful.

For Chanhee, she also got a kill, which she accomplished by releasing an arrow while riding hard on a zorse. She sat beside Jon and snuggled against him as they eat their hard-earned meat.

Jon kissed the top of her head, their bond growing very strong from when they first shared a bed together, or a bunch of furs in their current situation. While he knew that she was a pretty, what they had was… pure. There was no politics behind, no coin exchanges happening, or some ulterior motive that got their relationship started. No, what this was merely comprised of two people young and sharing something that all couples would die for. For just a moment, Jon was glad that Ned Stark never told anyone of who he really was, as he could enjoy what he had with Chanhee and not worry about pissing off or scandalizing some house he probably would’ve had no business knowing with if he was a bastard instead of the last male heir of House Targaryen. I wonder if this was how my father, my birthfather, must’ve felt when many maidens pursued because of what he had and not because of who he was as a man.

Jon didn’t want to dwell so much on it and would’ve liked to think that besides his love for his mother Lyanna, he did love Elia as time went on. My half-siblings, Aegon and Rhaenys, deserved better than what happened to them.

Not wanting to brood more, he simply cuddled against Chanhee, just enjoying life’s simple joys without having to care about what he had to as a prince of House Targaryen, as the coming of the wights, and other matters that would soon demand his undivided attention.

As Jon and Chanhee were about to head back to their yurt for the night, maybe to make love again, they were called to Sela’s yurt, with someone telling them that they received a response from Trader Town. So soon?

As they entered her yurt, Jon and Chanhee saw the emissary and greeted him courteously before they froze at the sight of imperial cavalry officers, both of whom were unarmed and seated across from Sela.

“Don’t worry,” Sela assured them both. “A condition for me extending my hospitality to these Goi,” she eyed them distrustfully. “Was that they leave their weapons outside of my camp. If they bring harm to you or any of us, they’ll wish for a quick death.”
Jon and Chanhee slowly sat down, even though Sela’s assurances did little to comfort them. *Will they arrest us, or get the bounty on our heads?* From the last time they had spilled Goi blood, these cavalrymen might have been tough but did not give off the impression that they were smart.

Then, Sumeng entered the yurt, also at Sela’s insistence. Upon seeing their Crown Prince, both officers stood up and fell prostrate in front of him. Sumeng bid them to sit back down before sitting between Jon and Sela.

“Finally, some of my people,” Sumeng made clear his relief. “Where did you come from?”

“Trader Town, Your Highness,” one of them answered him with reverence. “General Kitara and General Feng have asked us to see to your condition.”

“Well, aside from the zorse piss I’ve been drinking and having to live among these savages, I’m fine,” Sumeng told them, which made the two Goi give nasty looks to Sela. Jon and Chanhee shook their heads, as the Crown Prince just didn’t know how to stop insulting the very people that treated him with respect despite him being difficult.

“How dare you shake your head in front of His Highness, white devil!” the other Goi roared at Jon. “You know, General Kitara has issued an order for your arrest for the murder of imperial cavalrymen, one of whom I knew well. If it weren’t for the woman jhat here, we would happily take satisfaction in arresting you and this Chogo whore.”

Sumeng cleared his throat, getting his attention. “Is this how you speak in my presence? By throwing insults at my rescuer?”

The Goi kneeled again and placed his head on the furs. “I am sorry, Your Highness. I will be more careful.”

“You do that,” Sumeng bid him to sit, again.

“Now, then,” Sela spoke to the emissary. “What has Lord Joon offered for the safe return of Prince Sumeng, Prince Daeron, and Chanhee?”

“When you are referring to the Crown Prince, address him as ‘His Highness!’” the Goi who spoke first tried to scold Sela, only for her to stare daggers at him and causing him to back down in fear.

“Lord Joon is prepared to offer seventeen thousand and five hundred silver taels along with two years and two moons’ worth of harvest and livestock,” the emissary relayed the offer.

“That’s less than what I asked you to get,” Sela became annoyed at her emissary.

“He said to warn you of the potential consequences from trying to take advantage of Prince Daeron and his Chogo woman,” the emissary pointed to them both.

“What consequences?”

“He said that if you tried to hold him against his will, Prince Daeron will know and we might all die from dragon fire and his large wolf biting our heads off,” the emissary paraphrased Lord Joon’s threats.

“Wait a minute. A prince?” the other Goi scoffed at Jon. “You telling me that this white devil, this murderer, is actually someone important?”

Jon crossed his arms. “I shall correct you. Those men that you accuse me of murdering, they tried
to kill me and Chanhee here. And they said that they were paid to do so by someone that I will not
name yet. Plus, my direwolf would only attack those that try to threaten me and whomever I enjoy
close bonds with, but I wouldn’t expect you two to understand since your hatred for the Chogo
drowns out all logic from your little minds.”

Both of the Goi ground their teeth, increasingly angered at the white devil daring to talk back to
them, but Sumeng stepped in and made them be quiet.

“What was said about his white wolf and his dragon are all true. I’ve seen his dragon burn a score
of zorsemen, my captors, in a matter of seconds. What’s more, I’ve personally seen his prowess in
combat, as it takes a certain bravery to charge headlong into a group of zorse riders and slash at
their ribs,” Sumeng defended Jon, which shocked both of the Goi. “If Governor Kitara issued an
arrest warrant for him, then I shall order him to pardon him and the Chogo woman and also order
an investigation as to why the men he killed tried to kill him.”

Jon was surprised that Sumeng would go that far for him. *I might have rescued him, but given what
kind of man he’s showing to be, this is unexpected.*

“Your will shall be done, Your Highness,” a Goi bowed with deference to their prince.

*Oh, this is getting ridiculous,* Jon thought of how much reverence they were showing to Sumeng,
but was careful not to make it evident as he was defending him and Chanhee.

Sela brought the conversation back to focus. “So, Lord Joon is expecting that I take his offer or
Prince Daeron will unleash his fury on me?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” the emissary confirmed.

Sela sighed before nodding. “Well, I aimed high and I got more than what I was hoping for.”


“Key rule in negotiation, you three,” Sela said. “Aim for the highest offer that you can think of
while also preparing your lowest expectations.” Before she revealed further, she had the emissary
escort the Goi out of her yurt. “Seventeen thousand and five hundred silver taels is more than
enough to last us through a brutal winter, and two years’ worth of food is a bonus. I had lower
expectations, but I always aim high.”

“That’s what negotiation usually is,” Sela replied. “You rarely will get the outcome you’re hoping
for, but the best you can do is get the next best. And my next best was still more than I had
expected to obtain.”

“Interesting,” Jon rubbed his beard in thought while Chanhee was amazed at how Sela turned out
to be experienced in such matters. As for Sumeng, he was dumbfounded that a woman on the
plains could even think this far. “Also important, your Lord Joon has the wrong impression of me. I
am not stupid as to invite the wrath of your creatures and I am just as anxious to return the Crown
Prince back to his lands. The longer he stays here, the more problems I will get. However, I was
not going to make the same mistake as the renegade Detu and I now have more protection from
those that would try to usurp me.”

Jon remained stunned at how wise Sela really turned out to be, and how crafty she was. *I guess
being a slave before becoming a jhat makes you do things that most people wouldn’t be capable of*
doing, he pondered.

It also made Jon think of how the schemes between the powerful were formed. *So negotiating like how Sela did with Lord Joon is one way of surviving?* Even at his young age, Jon saw the value in a good bargain, as evidenced from his trips to Winter Town. But bargaining among the powerful was an entirely different matter and Jon was still unsure if he could learn the artform that was negotiation. *Guess I’ll have to find out.*

After Sela confirmed with her emissary that Lord Joon granted them safe conduct to imperial territory, she had Jon, Chanhee, and Sumeng prepare to head south. But before they could return to their yurt, their path was blocked by the two Goi cavalymen.

“You fucking cunts!” the more talkative Goi shouted through gritted teeth. “You think you’re safe here?”

“Well, that’s more than you can say for both of you,” Jon shot back.

“You killed a friend of mine, you bastard,” the other Goi spit near his feet. “I will have satisfaction, safe conduct or not.”

“You would disobey your general’s orders?” Chanhee scoffed, not surprised.

“And you, you fucking whore! All you Chogo will know your place, but not before I get a taste from you,” he looked at her with the most malevolent stare one could imagine from a man.

“I’d like to see you try,” Chanhee challenged him, which made the Goi step toward them to strike. But before they did, Ghost made his presence known by growling behind them. Also, Meleys flew in from above and landed in front of them, hissing at them with a ferocity Jon and Chanhee had not seen before.

“It’s true,” the talkative Goi whispered in fear. “You do have a dragon.”

“That’s right,” Jon stepped forward while putting his hand on Dark Sister’s hilt and Chanhee revealed her dao. “You really think that it’s a good idea to threaten the both of us? Come on. Let’s see you what you can do.”

The Goi was tempted to accept his challenge despite the dragon and direwolf surrounding them, but the other Goi grabbed his arm and shook his head. “You haven’t seen the last of us. One way or another, you will see what happens when you fuck with our people and livelihood,” he threatened.

“We’ll be waiting,” Chanhee answered back, getting her more glares from the Goi before they turned around and walked away, Ghost growling at them as they passed each other.

Jon and Chanhee sighed in relief, but they were still worried at what the Goi might try to do as they retired for the night, Ghost and Meleys following them.

What the Goi didn’t know was that their Crown Prince had listened in, increasing his frustration at their stupidity. *If those cavalymen try to harm my rescuer, they will answer to me.* While he was aware that the court didn’t think much of him, he knew how to keep the people in his life happy and content and he wasn’t about to fail in that regard. *My word is good, so Jon and the Chogo woman won’t have to worry about me.*
Joon is now facing a potential threat from the magistrate, who alongside the garrison commander are plotting to undermine him and kill Jon and Chanhee for humiliating him. This can't end well.

And now, Jon has got a very important lesson, which all of us can apply to in our lives. Being able to negotiate is a skill that is very difficult to obtain and requires a lot of experience. Negotiation is important in business, politics, the military, and practically every aspect of human interaction. Here, Jon can't just go charging in to solve every problem that comes his way. He learned just a little in canon with the wildlings, but here in Yi-Ti, he'll learn to become a master negotiator.

Fingers crossed on what the Goi will plan to do, and how Sumeng will act to protect the ones who rescued him.
A Step Before the Deadly Plunge

Chapter Notes

Hope you are all staying safe in these uncertain times. We can do this together. Been delayed with my graduate school stuff (almost done), but I will get back into a normal writing pace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Benjen sat in the remains of a Jogos Nhai encampment, one of the many that he had come across as he searched for Jon before the provosts found him. This was the third camp that he had found abandoned, which confused him since the Jogos Nhai that he had fought at least put up a fight. Now, they were nowhere to be seen.

After a few days, they found a zorsemen who had been left behind by his brothers in the camp they were currently in. “Where are the others?” Benjen asked in guanhua. However, he didn’t understand it, so he signaled one of his men, who knew the Jogos Nhai tongue, to interpret for him. “Ask him where his friends are.”

The cavalryman, the captain in command of the squadron that Benjen took with him, pushed against the zorsemen while yelling in his tongue. “He said that they ran north, back to where they came from.”

“Why?” Benjen became more perplexed, as an army of zorsemen wouldn’t just disappear without good reason.

“He said that their leader, a jhat by the name of Detu, has been killed when two strangers came into his yurt and freed the Crown Prince,” the squadron captain translated.

“Wait. The Crown Prince has been freed?” This changes things.

“Yes,” the captain interpreted. “He said that the two strangers were outsiders who came in the middle of the night and killed Detu in his bed. One was a woman of the steppes, probably a Goi or a Chogo, and the other was a white devil.”

Benjen blinked in surprise, knowing who exactly the zorseman was talking about from those descriptions alone. “What else?”

“He said that Detu’s riders tried to pursue them, but the steppes woman and the white devil turned out to be better in combat than expected. What’s more, the large wolf creature helped out considerably,” but the captain stopped his translation, as the zorseman’s next words seemed to trouble him.

“Well, captain. What did he say?” Benjen needed what came next.

“He said that a… red dragon came in from the sky and burned many of his brothers, forcing them to retreat and the two riders to disappear with their prize,” the captain interpreted, causing murmurs among the cavalrymen that had accompanied Benjen.

A red dragon… Meleys? How did she fly there so fast and how did she know that Jon needed help?
Then, he remembered that his nephew had a bond with a dragon that couldn’t be explained to others and Meleys was growing to be a fast and cunning creature just like her namesake. *Dragons are quite something. If only there were still around when I was born...*

While he had seen Rhaegar and the other Targaryens at Harrenhal, it was something else entirely to see actual dragons fly through the sky for the first time in centuries. And several times Benjen lose track of Meleys whenever she soared through the air. *Her speed might change as she gets bigger, but she’ll still be fast.*

Going back to the present moment, he questioned the zorsemen further. “Why were your people running north?”

“He said that Detu was the only one who kept the jhats together, since many of them were not sure if they could stand up to the might of the empire. But given their beliefs in the stormsingers, they didn’t see a choice. And now that he’s dead, they see no point in going further,” the captain translated.

“Well, that ended pretty quickly,” Benjen noted, but wasn’t surprised. Most wildling incursions in the north were not overly impressive and usually crumbled under pressure from an organized force. “But the Chogo woman and the white devil, ask him which direction they went.”

“He said the last time anyone saw them, they were heading west, possibly towards the Steel Road,” the captain interpreted.

“All right, then,” Benjen stood up. “And that’s where we should go. Get the men on their horses. We’re leaving as soon as possible.”

“What about the zorsemen?” the captain asked Benjen.

As he was still a prisoner, he had to decide on his fate. “Ask him why he’s still here and not with his brethren.”

“He said that he was still sleeping when the others left. He doesn’t know where they are now.”

Benjen rubbed his chin in thought before reaching a decision. “Bind him and take him with us.”

“Captain, are you sure we can spare the extra baggage? He might slow us down,” the captain disputed.

“Not like he has anywhere to go. And since he’s part of the renegades, he might have valuable information for the general. What harm can he do to us?”

Benjen mounted his horse, as did the captain and the others, while the zorsemen had his hands tied to the saddle and being surrounded by other cavalrymen. *Good thing they’re not Goi, or we’ll have a problem on our hands.*

They spent the next two days galloping westwards towards the Steel Road, stopping only to rest and water their horses. *If I were Jon, I’d make my way to Trader Town. It’s the only place where I can be safe under imperial troops, if they didn’t get the orders to arrest Jon and Chanhee on sight.*

As they were about to near the parts of the Steel Road closest to Trader Town, Benjen and the men came across an army courier. He could tell by the flag he tied to his back and the type of horse he rode, which was smaller than the regular type of horse but had sturdier legs to allow for longer distances.
“Soldier,” Benjen called out to the courier.

“Who are you?” the courier was surprised to see a white devil approach him.

“This is Brigade Captain Benjen Stark, commander of the flying column of the Northwest Army,” he introduced himself.

“Captain Stark,” the courier recognized that name. “I have a message that must reach headquarters. It concerns the exchange between a zorse jhat named Sela the Hyrkoon and General Kitara.”

“An exchange?”

“I’m not authorized to tell you the details, as I don’t have any orders besides the ones given to me from Trader Town,” the courier said.

Benjen took a wild guess, as there was only instance where there would be any exchange between the army and the zorsemen despite the prime minister’s orders. “Am I correct to believe that this exchange has something to do with the Crown Prince?”

The courier’s eyes widened. “How… how did you know that?”

“Only General Kitara would engage in something like that, soldier. Now tell me, what exactly are the terms?”

The courier gulped, not expecting the white devil to have a keen mind. “Well, captain. The Crown Prince will be exchanged to Trader Town in exchange for thousands of silver taels and some food. Accompanying the Crown Prince is a Chogo woman and another white devil.”

*That’s Jon and Chanhee!* “And the exchange will take place at Trader Town?”

“Yes, Captain,” the courier confirmed. “Now, please. I must make haste to headquarters.”

“Good luck, soldier;” Benjen bid him on before turning to the men. “All right. You heard him. We’re going to Trader Town.”

“But Captain Stark, why go there? Shouldn’t it be safe for those involved in that exchange?” the squadron captain asked.

“It’s my nephew, captain. Won’t you do the same for yours?” The captain got the point. “Plus, it won’t do any harm if there was a familiar wife and added security. I’m sure that General Kitara will understand.”

“As you wish, Captain.”

“Let’s move!” Benjen galloped towards Trader Town and thus his nephew. *I pray to the old gods that he’ll be alive and unspoiled when I see him.*

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Jon and Chanhee rode alongside Sela and her band of Jogos Nhai as they journeyed on the Steel Road towards Trader Town. Sumeng was in the center, since his status as the heir to the Emperor of Yi-Ti called for the Jogos Nhai to protect him. One of the Goi had also accompanied them, with the other riding ahead to let Lord Joon and Trader Town know that they were coming.

Sumeng had become considerably gracious to his hosts after knowing that he will soon return home, although his air of superiority remained. For example, he ordered one of Sela’s riders to give him some wine as they were resting, only for that rider to spit near him.
“You dare ignore me?” Sumeng cried out. “I am the Crown Prince of the Empire and I demand that you give me your wineskin.”

“You don’t demand anything of us, Your Highness,” Sela shot back. “We’re not your subjects and if you want the wine, you’re going to have to pay for it.”

“Oh, really?” Sumeng scoffed. “You’re about to get paid seventeen thousand and five hundred silver taels as part of the price. Won’t you people not have to worry about money for the rest of this season?”

“It’s not about the money, Prince Sumeng. It’s the attitude behind it. It’s common courtesy to ask nicely for a drink, or if you must, pay for it. Not just in the plains, but to anyone you meet,” Sela said. “Or is common courtesy too much to ask from us mere mortals?”

“Hey, woman,” the Goi man called out to Sela. “Speak properly to Prince Sumeng. It’s proper.”

“I can take care of myself,” Sumeng told the Goi, who quieted out of reverence.

“I don’t know about that,” Jon whispered to Chanhee, who giggled.

“I was raised in the palaces of the emperors, trained to become the eighteenth to sit on the throne. I have had servants to wait on me and make me aware of all that I had needed to know,” Sumeng continued with haughtiness. “I am above the all of the rest because it is how things are.”

“If that is how things are, then how about you explain to me how a slave, a captive from Kayakayanaya, was able to become a jhat?” Sela posed.

“You people are not civilized and therefore do not have what it takes to form a stable form of governance,” Sumeng answered condescendingly. “It’s only natural that your leaders come and go while the fireflies.”

Sela rolled her eyes. “And you think your form of governance, the one that you so proudly will take over one day, is any better than ours?”

“We have trade, we have standardized forms of monies, we have armies, and we have roads because of how we rule ourselves,” Sumeng defended. “What can you say for your people?”

“From how you described, all I hear are a massive set of rules that would all tie us down. We might not be as rich as you, but we’re free,” Sela bit back.

“You call this freedom? Having to live like commoners on the plains and having to fight for your next meal?” Sumeng waved his arms around. “Even the poorest harlot in the capital can expect to have meals every day.”

“And you would know harlots?” Sela became very upset at what Sumeng was saying.

“I’m just saying that you people chose to live like savages, and this is where you end up. No wonder why we have so little regard for you,” Sumeng stated dismissively.

“And no wonder why we don’t like you southerners at all,” Sela shook her head. “You think survival is something that only us have to live with? What about you? Is survival a consequence of when you are able to deal with the vultures at your court? We’re all hungry, Prince Sumeng. We have to fight for food, but those men in your court fight for something else. And they will kill each other to get what they want. That doesn’t make you lot better than us. We’re the same.”
“No, we’re not,” Sumeng denied.

“And where did your ancestors come from and how did they become emperors? Well, I’ll tell you that they killed who they needed to kill in order to get the throne. Just like the previous emperors, you come from a line of murderers,” Sela evaluated with honesty.

“Not true,” Sumeng gasped. “My ancestor, Seongmin Bu, had to overthrow the previous dynasty after there was too much corruption in the court and when there were plans to invade Asshai, which would have bankrupted the empire. My ancestor saved our people.”

“Oh, my gods. You really are a naïve fool, aren’t you?” Sela derided. “Of course, your ancestor would emphasize the previous emperor’s negative actions in order to make himself look better. But the fact remains that he got the throne through usurpation, meaning that anyone with the gall and power can become emperor if they chose to. Meaning that you will probably perish should that happen.”

“You would speak of my death after all of the effort that you put in for the reward you’ll get?”

“I didn’t say anything about killing you, you idiot. Don’t you ever pay attention whenever someone talks to you?” Sela wasn’t finished, however. “You should know that there is no difference between us. You might live in a big palace, have servants attend to your every little need, fatten yourself with many meals, but make no mistake. If given the choice between life and death, you’ll like the savages that you so look down upon.”

“Never in my life will I have to resort to barbaric methods to ensure my survival,” Sumeng declared.

“We’ll see about that,” Sela finished the conversation.

Jon listened on as Sela tore in Sumeng. While not as vicious as Joffrey from what he had seen, he was also very condescending to those he saw as beneath him and also not very wise when it came to his choice of words. Still, he at least was gracious to his hosts and to him and Chanhee for rescuing him. Let’s just hope that he doesn’t cause any more messes.

But Jon also had worries about them rescuing Sumeng. While he was no longer a prisoner, there was the risk of exposure to his true identity because of his actions. At the start, the only people who knew Jon’s actual heritage was Lord Joon, his family, the household at Kushiro, and Lord Joon’s teacher in the Mountains of the Morn. And now, his secret was slowly coming out into the open and thus more people knew about him being a prince of House Targaryen, which would include those that did not have Lord Joon’s scruples. As the Lord of Kushiro said to Sam, “The more attention you have, the bigger target you paint on your back.”

Sumeng promised to have Lord Joon revoke the warrant for Jon and Chanhee after killing the Goi that tried to kill them and also reward them, but that would also make more people aware of his existence. At the same time, Jon understood that besides Ghost, him being bonded with Meleys would not have been kept secret forever. His worries lay in whoever tried to manipulate him due to that one fact.

It also made Jon worry about what his aunt Daenerys must be going through. He knew that that she had no power at her disposal besides her dragons, and that they would be many others who would try to take advantage of her because of her dragons. But unlike him, she really didn’t have anyone to truly protect her from those that would try to use her for their own ends and the dragons were still hatchlings, meaning that it would be years before they would be of any significant use to Daenerys, especially if she would become a rider.
Despite Jon’s worries about his identity being revealed to more people in Yi-Ti, he also began to prepare himself in his mind of when people would approach him because of his lineage. Whether they had good intentions or nefarious designs on him, Sam, or Benjen was yet to be seen, but he had to stop acting like a bastard from the past and start thinking like how a prince would conduct himself. As Sumeng said, he needed to behave as befitting of his station, his true one. But I don’t know how to act like a prince.

“More brooding, Jon?” Chanhee saw him as they rode on their zorses.

“Just worried about a lot of things,” he answered.

“Like when we arrive at Trader Town,” Chanhee caught on.

“Prince Sumeng said that he’ll reward us greatly, but I’m not sure if the rewards will be good signs for us. People will know that I am a Targaryen prince, with an actual dragon and large direwolf with me,” he pointed upwards to Meleys, who was flying in circles above them, and then to Ghost, who was trotting alongside the mounted group and making especially the Goi man very nervous. “It’s possible that I, along with my Uncle Benjen and Sam, will be taken to the capital further south and my days of living quietly will be over. I’ve only heard what Lord Joon had to say about what goes on at court, but I am not sure if I can survive among those who will take advantage of me because of what I have.”

“And?” Chanhee sensed that there were more.

“I’m sure that you’ll be also be rewarded greatly, as you should. But I fear what will happen to you if we were to go to court. They’ll only see you as a barbarian, even though you are more than that, and you’ll face hardships when we do go there. From how Prince Sumeng acted, I fear of what the others at the court will think of you, especially if they have much more pompous attitudes towards other people,” Jon laid out his worries.

Chanhee listened before hearing Jon finish. “I think… you are worrying too much about things that haven’t happened yet.”

Jon was surprised. “What do you mean?”

“It’s possible that both of us will have to be present at the capital when this is all done, and yes, I might have deal with those who think themselves superior to others, which is something that I’ve grown used to over the years. But we’re here and not there yet. You’re thinking way too far in the future, Jon,” Chanhee answered.

“But shouldn’t we be worried about what the next weeks will have in store for us?” Jon had to worry about many things throughout his life, but here was a person who told him to not be agonize. How can I not have uneasiness?

“We should,” Chanhee conceded. “But if it gets to the point where we begin to worry about every little thing and thus immobilizes us from actually doing the things that we should do, that’s when the worrying becomes a problem.”

“How would you know?”

“Well, I had to worry about staying alive and fighting off those that meant harm to me ever since I was a girl. My father and brother weren’t around, so everything that I did so that I can wake up the next morning was because of my own efforts,” she said. “I had no one to count on, so eventually, I didn’t need anyone else to get to the next day.”
“But?” Jon knew that there was more to Chanhee’s words.

“One day, I was out hunting because I didn’t eat for two days. I can’t remember exactly how that happened, but on the plains, I saw a goat lying about. Because I was afraid of starving to death, I ignored all of the flies and the smells that came from the corpse. I merely thought, ‘It’s only venison. I just need to cook it up and I’ll be fine.’ But no. I threw up all of my insides and I passed out. Because I was already hungry and thirsty, I fainted not long after. It’s only because of some relatives who found me was I able to live,” Chanhee revealed.

“My gods,” Jon uttered in shock.

“And that’s when I realized that I shouldn’t let my worries, especially those related to hunger, rule my every action. If you let your worries control you, then you will be nothing more than a slave rather than someone who can think and act on their own,” she stated.

“So, what do you suggest?”

“Keep worrying, but at the same time, be focused in the moment. The next day is always filled with uncertainty, so why burden yourself more when you have enough right now?”

“That’s an… interesting perspective,” Jon frankly never thought about it that way. “I’ve been worrying about me being a bastard for so long that I’ve always looked far into my future, where I could fight alongside Benjen at the Wall and not really dwell on the issues of the present.

Ned Stark was prone to bouts of brooding, which was part of the reason why many saw Jon as taking after his supposed father alongside Arya, but he worried about many things because of how others, mainly Catelyn, had treated him. But he had to concede that Chanhee had a point, since he let his worries dictate every single action that he had undertaken.

As much as he worried about Robb and his other siblings regarding their ability to handle themselves without Ned, they had an easier time living in Winterfell because they only had to worry about the moment and not really thinking about what was on the horizon. Well, that’s questionable, since Sansa always worried about not being with someone that was worthy of her attention and wanted to please Lady Catelyn.

Jon sighed as he pondered more on Chanhee’s words. Despite them being near the same age, she was infinitely wiser than he was, which was only natural given that she had to mature very quickly on the harsh settings of the plains. She might not have been well-read, but the things in her mind could rival all that Maester Luwin ever told him, if not more. So many things to learn and unlearn in these lands, he thought.

“And I am touched that you are worried about me, because you want to take me with you wherever you go, right?” Chanhee asked.

Jon quickly nodded. “Of course. We’re together, so I should.”

Chanhee nudged her zorse closer to his before reaching for him and kissing his cheek. “We’ll manage. As long as we’re together, everything will be fine.”

Jon smiled. “Yes, it shall.”

Then, Sumeng moved his zorse next to Jon, almost cramming him between the two riders. “Prince Daeron, I said that I would reward you. I think it’s only fair that I reveal to you some of the things you should expect.”
Jon internally groaned, not wanting his moment with Chanhee to be bothered. “And what would they be, Your Highness?”

“Well, first, I will talk to Lord Joon and have him rescind the warrants on both of you. Then, you shall be taken to Yin and be treated as a prince. I expect my father to grant you your own house and a handsome income so that you can maintain a proper dignity,” Sumeng began.

“May I ask what my house will be like and the amount of my stipend? I won’t complain, but I must prepare myself so that there will be no surprises,” Jon inquired.

“Every man and woman granted imperial privileges will have their own residence in the capital, which has its own courtyard, household, and bodyguard among other aspects. Since I am the Crown Prince, I have the largest residence, but it still pales when compared to the palace occupied by my father,” Sumeng continued.

*Of course.*

“And as the Crown Prince, I am granted an income of one thousand golden yunbaos a year, which amounts to five hundred thousand silver taels in the common circulation.”

Jon gulped, as he had difficulty wrapping his head around such numbers. The wealthiest house in the North were the Manderlys, but their yearly intake wouldn’t have matched those further southwards and even those at King’s Landing from what he had heard. And here was a man who made House Lannister’s wealth seem insignificant.

“For you, Prince Daeron, I imagine that you’ll be accorded an income of fifty thousand golden yunbaos, which equals two hundred and fifty thousand silver taels.”

Jon almost coughed. *That’s five times more than what Lord Joon gets from his lands every year.*

“I think that’s quite enough, Prince Sumeng,” Jon didn’t want to know more, as he was already feeling overwhelmed by the potential rewards the Crown Prince spelled out.

“But that’s not all,” Prince Sumeng didn’t listen. “You will be invited to court and given a position in the empire. You handle yourself very well with weapons, so I will petition my father to have you appointed to the imperial guard.”

Now, that was unexpected for Jon. “The… imperial guard?”

“A select group of men who protect the emperor, just like your Kingsguard in Westeros if I remember correctly. But… there’s a lot more freedom given to its members and every officer in the army and fleet have to answer to the officers in the imperial guard, since they do outrank everyone else besides the emperor and the captain of the guard, Chenyin Gao.”

While Jon was struggling to wrap his head around all of the rewards that Sumeng was laying out for him, he did notice a certain faintness when he mentioned the captain’s name.

“Is this… Chenyin Gao a friend of yours?” Jon asked.

Sumeng sighed. “Yes. We’ve known each other a long time. It’ll be nice to have drinks with him when I do return home.”

*I can understand that,* Jon thought with sympathy. While he was getting more used to Yi-Ti, he longed for the day that he would return home and spend some quality time with his family, the ones who were still alive. *Don’t forget aunt Daenerys,* he reminded himself.
“What about Chanhee?” Jon pointed to her. “She helped rescue you. What does she get?”

“Yes,” Sumeng stared at the Chogo woman, as if forgetting she was there. “Of course. I shall petition my father to grant you an income and good place to say in the capital. Perhaps… you’ll do well among the women there, after some refining on your part.”

“Refining?” Chanhee was taken aback.

“With respect, you’re a woman of the steppes. If you appear in court like this, you’ll be a figure of fun and people will laugh at you because of your uncivilized ways. You have to become presentable if you want to survive,” Sumeng outlined.

“Not sure if I’ll like your reward, then,” Chanhee scratched her head uncomfortably.

“But… I have to reward you somehow. Debts have to be repaid.”

Jon cringed at that, since it reminded him of the Lannisters’ words on how they repay their debts.

“The only payment that will satisfy me is for the Goi to be punished. They’ve caused my people a lot of pain, so anything that hurts them will be enough,” Chanhee announced loudly, so that the Goi man could turn around and glare at her. But he turned back around under Sumeng’s scolding look.

“I will… take that into consideration,” Sumeng offered. “After all, they are a loyal people to the empire and thus have to be treated carefully if we don’t want to set a bad precedent.”

“Fine,” Chanhee groaned in annoyance.

“We’ll soon be in the outskirts of Trader Town, all of you,” Sela called out. “Be ready.”

Jon, Chanhee, and Sumeng nodded, excited to return to familiar surroundings, but the former two were nervous at what lay next. They grabbed their hands, feeling their strength flow between them. *No matter what happens, as long as she’s with me, everything will be fine.*

The Goi man galloped as hard as he could towards the outskirts of Trader Town. He had to leave his partner behind with the Crown Prince, the Chogo woman, and the white devil with the large wolf and fast dragon. While he took offense that a woman from his people’s rivals was even allowed in Prince Sumeng’s presence, the white devil took up a larger part of his anger. He couldn’t believe that a foreigner was able to achieve such merit, and his actions would no doubt protect him from any retribution that would have come after killing his comrades. *He will die before that happens.*

Before leaving Trader Town with his partner in order to confirm that the Crown Prince was alive and thus allowing the exchange to go forward, he had received secret orders from Major-General Ikken Feng and the magistrate of Tiqui. They were both summoned to the general’s personal quarters, where they met General Feng and the magistrate.

“I trust you know why you are here,” General Feng started.

“Does it have anything to do with the white devil and the Chogo whore?” one of the Goi asked.

“Correct. They are safe and sound with our Crown Prince and a jhat called Sela the Hyrkoon. As you are aware, the magistrate here posted a bounty on the white devil’s head and here is a great opportunity for you both to collect on it,” Feng pointed out. “A bonus is the Chogo whore, who
you can treat however you wish only after the white devil is dead and the Crown Prince safe within our hands.”

“Wouldn’t there be a risk that the Crown Prince might protect the white devil, considering that it was he who rescued him?” the Goi’s partner asked the general.

“Let us worry about that little detail, cavalryman,” the magistrate joined in. “We could twist it in a way that the white devil and the Chogo whore had reprehensible designs after breaking the Crown Prince out of captivity. They might have… wanted to keep him in captivity so that they can benefit from the ransom that Lord Joon will pay out when they could have turned southward back to this town.”

“Do you know that for sure?” the Goi man asked with uncertainty.

“He is a white devil and the Chogo woman is a longstanding rival of the Goi, a loyal client people of the empire. No one will ask too many questions,” the magistrate assured him.

“Then why would General Kitara go through the trouble of sheltering the white devil and the Chogo whore?” the Goi man’s partner inquired.

“That’ll be something that we’ll pursue once we begin an investigation into the governor’s conduct,” the magistrate put his hands on the low table. “I will send a letter to the Inspector-General of the Army in Yin, who will send a representative to help oversee the investigation. Given the right motivation and amount of taels, we can steer the investigation towards a favorable outcome. I’m sure that the Inspector-General will have to remove Lord Joon from command of the army and thus send him to court to face another trial from the emperor. His imprisonment or execution for sheltering an enemy of the empire, who kidnapped the Crown Prince when he had the opportunity to return him immediately, are both acceptable. Perhaps, maybe his family will be forced from their home while Kushiro will be given to another lord, one who is more… agreeable to the conditions of this province.”

The Goi man nodded. “You have all this all figured out, haven’t you?”

“You have your orders,” General Feng cut in. “The magistrate is willing to pay ten thousand taels, an increase from the previous bounty, and that is dead or alive. Naturally, since I facilitated this arrangement, I am entitled to… four taels to every ten.”

“That would leave only three thousand for the both of us,” the Goi’s partner realized.

“Smart one, aren’t you? But the remaining six thousand will have to be distributed among the men you will have accompany you. After all, you need at least twenty men to put off a successful ambush, given that the white devil and his whore were able to take on nine.”

The Goi men shifted uncomfortably, not liking the terms. “What about the rumors that the white devil has a dragon?”

“Fantastical claims,” the magistrate dismissed. “Just more words to put the fear of the gods into those that would try to oppose him. Make sure that the men you select are armed and ready to fight. And you shall get your just reward.”

The Goi men let out a collective sigh before agreeing to the terms. If they protested, both of them would have found some others to do the deed for them.

Soon enough and back in the present, the Goi man came across his compatriots, thirty of them in total and all armed with a mixture of daos, lances, bows and arrows, and tanegashima. The latter
came in either the longarm version or the shortarm version, with the shortarm allowing the user to use only one hand. But we haven’t used them in anger yet.

To decrease detection from the rest of the army that had come with Lord Joon to Trader Town, they had taken great pains to hide their weapons underneath thick cloaks. More importantly, they discarded their uniforms and adopted garments worn by smallfolk in order to blend in with the general population. The risk with soldiers not wearing traditional army attire is that if they were caught, they could be tried as spies and thus executed immediately. Six thousand tael buys a lot of courage, though, the Goi man mused.

“All right. You all know what must be done?” the Goi man asked them all, to which they nodded. “Good. Kill the white devil and the Chogo whore will be easy to capture. And extra tael on whoever kills the wolf creature and brings me his skin. Don’t waste your arrows or your shots.”

Now, we just have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that was sufficient for you all. We had to know what Benjen was up to and he's hauling ass to his nephew.

Jon is getting more pieces of wisdom from Chanhee, but also getting a taste of what will await him at Yin, the capital. If the rewards seem too much, Asian ruling dynasties experienced a level of opulence that the rest of the world couldn't match. But such comforts will be tempered by the dangers that are in the court, as the imperial officials are experienced players of the game just like in Westeros. And I would suggest that you all read up the Three Kingdoms Period of China and of Korea, the Sengoku Period of Japan, and the transition of the Ming to the Qing dynasty. Full of real-world game of thrones like the War of the Roses.

And now, we have the magistrate and the general attempting to sabotage the exchange by killing Jon and Chanhee. Fingers crossed on whether they can make it out alive.
"Please Don't Go"

Chapter Notes

I hope you all are doing well, especially as times are getting more difficult for those at least in America. Let's all hope that this blows over soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’re just a few hours from Trader Town! Be prepared!” called out the zorseman who acted as Sela’s emissary to Lord Joon at the town.

The group had traveled down the Steel Road from their initial encampment and was about to near their final destination. But Sela said that they would not actually enter Trader Town without getting guaranteed safe conducts from the imperial army. There was just too much bad blood between the zorsemen from the Plains of the Jogos Nhai and the soldiers of the Golden Empire to trust the word of Lord Joon, no matter how trustworthy people perceived him to be. Once they were within sight of the town, they would stop and wait for an imperial rider to meet them and provide them with their safe conducts. If they didn’t receive them, they would ride back up the Steel Road, for entering the town without the safe conduct passes opened many opportunities for unrestrained soldiers to attack and kill them.

But Lord Joon has good control over the army. They would never try to disobey him or work around him without incurring his wrath, Jon thought.

Even though he was not as bothered by being dirtied like Sumeng, he very much looked forward to a bath and some hot food after going without both for more than a few weeks. He also sought the comfort of soft sheets, as he intended to lay upon them and sleep for a week at the least. I know when enough is enough, Jon thought when reflecting on how long he had to live without the comforts of civilized society like at Kushiro.

As for Chanhee, she didn’t care about how she looked, as the three moons spent in the custody of Lord Joon were the exception of how she had lived for most of her life. She wasn’t bothered by the smell of animal dung, sweaty garments, and rotting flesh, all of which were common on the steppes. However, when she did clean herself up, she looked stunning, as the grime covered the slimness of her body, the pretty features on her face, and the muscles on her arms and legs, all of which Jon touched when they coupled. And he longed for when she would smell of flower blossoms again. I can’t think of that smell without thinking of her, he mused.

 Predictably, Sumeng was becoming the most anxious to seeing Trader Town, as he shuddered from the stench of animals and became increasingly sore as the journey towards the town continued, both of which started to make him whine more. Only Sela’s intervention prevented the group from suffering more of his incessant complaining, especially since she gave her speech on being grateful and polite to those who didn’t have to help him. Maybe this trip will change him for the better, Jon hoped, but he somehow expected to have his hopes crushed when they do return to civilization.

As for the Goi man, Jon noticed something… off about him. His eyes moved about in their sockets, looking around the plains in a nervous fashion. He gulped more than three time in the past hour and kept readjusting his gloves, armor, and weapons. Instead of the hatred that he held for Chanhee and Jon, he felt… uneasy around them. Or is it not us he’s worried about?
Jon’s first thoughts were that the Goi man was concerned about the state of his Crown Prince, as Sumeng had made it clear multiple times that he was getting impatient in reaching Trader Town. If that were the case, he would have brushed off the Goi man’s jumpiness. However, he kept glancing at Jon and Chanhee more than he did with Sumeng, befuddling him even more since he would only give the both of them vile stares. What’s going on?

Trying not to alert the Goi man, Jon nudged Chanhee. “You notice something odd with the Goi man there?” he spoke in his best goryeomal, as he had to guess that the Goi man knew how to speak guanhua besides the army’s nihongo tongue.

“Yes, I noticed it also,” Chanhee revealed, catching on to what Jon was doing. “He was never this nervous around us.”

“Maybe because Ghost and Meleys are here to protect us,” Jon pointed to his white direwolf and the red dragon, which flew above the group. “He’d seen them both protecting us when he and his friend tried to threaten us, and without his partner, he might be more afraid,” he hoped that was the case.

“No,” Chanhee shook her head. “There are many types of nervousness that I’ve seen, and I’ve seen that look before.”

“Where?” Jon was getting very concerned.

“In the plains, it’s not uncommon for Goi and Chogos to lead each other into a place where they might feel safe. I’ve seen a Chogo chief drinking milk provided by a Goi chief, since offering milk is a sign of peaceful intentions and a guarantee against any harm done. However, that Chogo chief didn’t know at the time that the milk was poisoned, and the Goi chief held him responsible for something that had happened between them. I can’t remember what made him do such a thing. But that chief died and thus we Chogo have a rule in not accepting milk from the Goi, since they might try to poison us,” Chanhee explained.

“Seven hells,” Jon whispered in shock. “I’m just surprised that the Goi chief was able to get away from violating such a practice. If you violate guest rights back in Westeros, you will be condemned by every family on the continent.”

“Too much has happened between my people and the Goi for them to simply trust on the guarantees of sharing milk to protect each other,” she replied. “But I was there when the chief from my people was poisoned, and that look in that Goi chief’s eyes… I should’ve warned him that something was wrong, because the Goi would never do that kind of gesture under any normal circumstance.”

“And you think something bad will happen because you see that look in the Goi’s face?” he fought the temptation to look at the Goi, for another long look at him might alert the cavalryman to what they were saying to each other.

“Whatever it is, we have to keep our eyes peeled,” Chanhee warned him. “I don’t trust the Goi to keep their anger under control especially around us and I don’t know if the safe conducts will be enough to protect us in Trader Town.”

“Right,” Jon agreed. “Whatever it is they might have planned for us, we’ll be ready, as long as we stick together.”

She nodded and smiled. “Together.”
“And now that we’re talking about us, I think it’s only fair that we talk about where we are ever since that night,” Jon wanted to know where they stood.

Chanhee bobbed her head. “All right. What do you want to say?”

“I think… we should tell Lord Joon that we’re together and that we should… be treated like those who are courting each other,” Jon slowly said.

Chanhee chuckled. “Come on, Jon. If you’re going to say something, say it clearly. Don’t talk slowly or hesitate, as those are not the reasons why I liked you in the first place.”

Jon cleared his throat. Here we go. “You’re the first woman that I love, and you are the first to accept me for who I am. And you’re… the prettiest and kindest girl that I’ve met so far, besides the ones that I have met before.”

“I’m not kind,” she denied. “When I am pushed, I will start hurting people.”

“And that’s the point. I think being a good person doesn’t mean you don’t fight when others try to do bad things to you. Being good to everyone, even those that wish you harm, is not being kind. That’s foolishness, and you’ve shown me that you are anything but that.”

“True,” she shrugged.

“What girl can compare to that? But I am not saying this just to flatter you. Everything became better with you here by my side, especially since I am a stranger to this land. And for the first time in my life, I think I know what love is.”

She smiled and touched his cheek. “I feel the same for you too. I think everything that my life was, just trying not to starve every day of the week ad staying alive from anything that wanted to kill me, became bearable when you entered it. But… I would be careful with how you use the word ‘love.’”


“And I don’t doubt it. But you say that I am the first woman that made you feel that way, which means that you don’t know how love really works.”

“What are you saying?”

“Do you think that you’re the first man to tell me that he loved me? I met only one person who said that to me, but he had an idea of love that revolved around his whims. And that’s when I learned that there is a difference between love and obsession.”

“Chanhee,” Jon shook his head frantically. “I love you. I don’t feel obsessed with you.”

“How do you know that?” she asked poignantly. “Before me, you’ve never felt those feelings with another woman. And I’ve seen too many times boys or men confusing the two. I think love comes when you cannot see a life without the one person you have such feelings for. And I’m sorry to say this, but I don’t think you can think of that. However, it’s not your fault. That’s just the way it is.”

“Chanhee,” Jon felt his heart beginning to tear, particularly because he saw his love’s eyes begin to water. “Why are you saying this?”

“I don’t think that I will be the only woman you’ll have such feelings for. And I know that you are not the only Targaryen in the world.”
That caught Jon by surprise. “Wait, are you talking about my aunt Daenerys?”

“You told me that you saw her through the flames. And who knows what might happen between you two? I might not be the most well-read person in the world, but I do understand that dragons have a connection that no one else can.”

“Chanhee…” Jon wasn’t sure how to answer. *Daenerys is beautiful and has three dragons with her. But I have feelings for the woman in front of me right now.* “You’re right. I don’t know what might happen between me and my aunt Daenerys when we do meet, but I can say this for sure: I do love you and I love the person that I am staring at and talking with right now. Whether you don’t believe me or trust my words, that is something that I cannot control.” He sighed shakily. “I don’t know what else I can say to persuade you otherwise, but my feelings for you are pure. If that’s not enough, so be it.”

He sniffled, not understanding why Chanhee would suddenly doubt his love for her.

Her eyes softened upon seeing how Jon was not going to plead further and giving her the choice to accept his words. She wiped some tears forming in her eyes, but she was now reassured regarding how he felt.

“Well, I guess all I can ask you is that we continue this together and find out more about this love between us,” she offered.

Jon grinned and pulled her in for a kiss. “I’d like that.”

“But just remember. Love is not something you can just give to anyone. That’s the mistake most men make, and the reason why love becomes so cheap.”

“I will,” Jon nodded affirmatively.

“We can talk about this more after we wash up at Trader Town, okay?”

“Okay.”

Suddenly, the lead zorsemen in Sela’s group whistled out while putting his fist up. Jon couldn’t see his face, but the way he moved his head reminded him of when he spent his days in the wolfswood, particularly when something was near but couldn’t be seen.

“What’s wrong?” Sumeng asked.

“Something’s not right,” Sela glanced around. “It’s quiet.”

“Doesn’t that describe the steppes for you people?”

Chanhee groaned, while Jon gave him a scolding look.

“Not this quiet,” Sela said while turning around to Sumeng. “You got anyone waiting for us?”

“What?” Sumeng was baffled.

“No, it’s not him,” Jon defended Sumeng before turning to the Goi man, who was very still. “Maybe he knows something.”

“You,” Sumeng called to the Goi man. “Why are you like that?”

Before the Goi man could answer, they heard horses neighing in the distance. Turning their heads
south down the Steel Road, they could make out riders galloping towards them.

*Are those the men that would give us the safe conduct? They look like in a hurry to meet us.* But seeing how fast they were coming at them and then seeing their dao unsheathed and their other weapons at the ready, Jon’s eyes widened.

“Get down, Your Highness!” the Goi man called out.

“Huh?” More than one person called out before they heard a voice pierce through the silence.

“UTE!” Before Jon or anyone could register the nihongo command for “fire,” thundering noises and clouds of smoke mixed in with flashes that broke out from all of the group charging at them. The zorseman who acted as the emissary was instantly felled, as were three others, as iron balls pierced through their furs and lodged themselves into the vital areas of the body. The zorses were also startled by the noise, having never heard them before that moment.

By some miracle, none of the iron balls had hit Jon. Quickly looking to Chanhee and Sumeng, both of whom were also not hit, he yelled, “Fall back! Ride back north!” He wheeled his zorse around to go back up the Steel Road away from Trader Town, with Chanhee, Sumeng, Ghost, and Meleys following him. Meanwhile, Sela had also decided to withdraw and followed the trio.

But before they could get to a safe distance away from the tanegashima that had fired upon them, arrows flew into the group, taking more of the zorsemen down. Looking around, Jon saw that the Goi man was nowhere to be seen. *Shit! He knew what was coming and he led us right into a trap!*

Jon glanced back south, with the mounted men gaining on them. Having possessed the element of surprise, they were able to get the jump on the group and thus cut them down to about twelve riders, including himself, Chanhee, and Sumeng. And as their backs were turned, they made for easy targets for the enemy, who were most likely to be Goi since the Goi man had warned Sumeng prior to the attack. *If we continue like this, we’ll get picked off easily.*

Seeing no other alternative, Jon circled his zorse back towards the group charging at them. Ghost and Meleys followed their companion, with the former running alongside him and the latter flying above him.

*What are you doing?* he heard Meleys asked with concern.

*The only thing that I can think of. Meleys, give them fire.*

*Gladly,* she answered as she climbed into the air to gain altitude. She then dove back down, picking up speed as she did, before unleashing a stream of dragonfire onto the first riders.

But sensing the danger, along with getting shocked that the rumors of the dragon’s existence were true, their attackers scattered and were thus disorganized, only allowing Meleys to get just two riders and their mounts on fire.

*They’re smart,* Meleys said to Jon. *They don’t seem to lack in ability.*

*I sensed that,* Jon replied as he drew Dark Sister and Longclaw. Seeing what Jon was doing, Chanhee also turned around and brought out her bow while nocking an arrow.

“Boy, I need you to attack. I don’t care which ones, just start killing,” Jon told Ghost, who immediately complied by jumping onto one of the riders, forcing him off of his horse while he crushed his skull with his jaws.
As for Jon, he saw an attacking cavalryman try to charge at him with a lance. But before it could touch him, he parried the lance with Dark Sister while using Longclaw to slash across his neck, the Valyrian steel making quick work of his neck and decapitating him.

His attention then changed to another horseman, but instead of a lance, he was trying to fire a tanegashima from horseback. Expectantly, he was struggling to take aim, as his target was not a static one and the weapon was just too heavy to hold without a rod to support it.

Jon charged at the cavalryman, who was readjusting his aim with the weapon. But before he could fire the weapon, he was hit with an arrow through his throat, which caused him to call backwards as his horse moved from underneath him. Turning around, he saw that Chanhee released the arrow. Both nodding to each other, they continued to fight their attackers alongside Meleys and Ghost.

Seeing the two taking the initiative, Sela unsheathed her swords before gesturing to two of her remaining zorsemen. “Watch this one,” she pointed to Sumeng. “Don’t let him get away and don’t let him get hurt, or all of this would have been for nothing.” She turned towards their attackers, who were panicking and disorganized. “Time to taste blood,” she said to herself with glee before she galloped into the fray. Her zorse collided with one of their attackers’ horses, causing the rider to slip off of his saddle. Before he could get back up, Sela speared him through his chest. As he was wearing no armor, it cut through his heart.

The rest of the zorsemen, save for the two protecting Sumeng, began to fight back with a ferocity that the enemy had not expected to have, given that the Jogos Nhai preferred to run rather than faced well-armed and experienced killers. One killed a cavalryman with a bow, another struck with a club, and another simply got close enough to grab at a horseman and wrestle him to the ground, where he started to pommel him.

As for Jon, he saw Meleys burn another rider and Ghost getting another kill by sinking his paws into his eyes. Just like when we faced the renegades.

He then looked at Chanhee, who felled one more cavalryman with her bow. But while she was distracted with her target, she failed to notice another closing in from her right side. The horse collided with her zorse, causing her to fall over and discard her bow in favor of her dao.

Seeing the one he loved in danger, Jon turned his zorse towards her. As the cavalryman dismounted and drew his dao, seeming to be happy to fight a Chogo woman with a blade, she prepared herself. However, both would not fight, as Jon slashed his head off with Longclaw.

“I had it under control,” Chanhee called out to him as he wheeled around to see if she was all right.

“I know you did. Just wanted to help,” Jon answered.

Suddenly, without warning, something had pierced through Chanhee, with a blood mist being released from the wound that had formed from the back to the front of her body. Time slowed down for Jon, as he saw his love look up to the sky, her body jerking forward from the force of whatever hit her, and her arms outstretched as she collapsed on her knees, blood dripping out from her mouth, as the sound of a tanegashima aimed at her while she was occupied echoed.

“NOOOOO!” Jon cried out as he dismounted his zorse and caught her before she completely fell on the ground. He put his hand on her wound, struggling to stop the flow of her blood as it spilled onto the grasses of the plains.

“Please, please, please,” Jon frantically said to himself as he cradled Chanhee’s head on his left arm. She was coughing up blood, the iron ball cutting her vital vessels. Everything around them
seemed to cease, as Jon was focused on keeping his love from falling into the waiting clutches of death.

“That… was not expected,” Chanhee jested between coughs.

Jon chuckled, but was struggling to keep the tears from falling. “Please, don’t talk. Don’t talk. Stay with me.”

Chanhee was gasping for air while groaning. “Jon, I’m sorry for what I said…”

“Shh, be quiet. I’m going to take care of you. You’re going to be all right.”

“I do love you, Jon. I shouldn’t have said all that I had said…”

“No, no. I understand. I would’ve said the same thing,” Jon tried to assure her.

Chanhee let out a softer groan. “The best time that I had was in your arms in that yurt…”

“Mine too,” Jon was getting desperate as Chanhee was gasping for more breaths of air as her throat was getting flooded with her own blood. “Hold on, you’re going to be all right.”

“You charging into them,” Chanhee used her dwindling strength to cup his cheek. “You’re a mad fucker, Jon.”

“I am,” Jon nodded quickly.

“Stay alive, Jon. We’ll see each other again,” her breathing was getting shallower.

“Don’t go. Please don’t go,” Jon was close to whimpering.

“I’ll always be with you, Jon,” were her final words before she sighed, dying in Jon’s arms.

“Oh!” Jon pushed his forehead against her cold one. “Seven hells! The old gods help me. Please help me.”

As he pleaded the old gods more, his mind began to return to the battle and the sounds of swords clanging and tanegashima firing started to pepper his ears once again. Looking up from Chanhee’s cold body, he saw the cavalrymen engaging the zorsemen. Despite the ferocity they displayed earlier, they started to be beaten, as they were still outnumbered despite the efforts of Meleys and Ghost, both of whom were being actively avoided by the attackers.

Without warning, Jon felt his grief over Chanhee’s departure become replaced with… rage. He felt fire emerge from his insides before, but this was something else. Something was begging to be clawed out of the depths of Jon’s body, and the ice in his veins were being exchanged for an inferno that could rival the deepest hell.

His words to keep Chanhee alive having gone unheeded and the fire from Meleys’ mouth being visible to Jon as they burned corpses into black ash, he tightened his jaw and slowly stood up, his hands slipping off of Chanhee’s body but still soaked in her blood.

Gripping both Longclaw and Dark Sister harder than before, his eyes scanned the plains for the one responsible and he immediately caught a cavalryman, who had dismounted to place his tanegashima upon a metal rode and aimed at Chanhee.

Jon recognized the man as the Goi man’s partner, who had threatened them both before Ghost and Meleys forced him to back down. Feeling an intense hate for the man who took the life of his love,
Jon ran towards the Goi man, Dark Sister and Longclaw at the ready.

The Goi man, seeing the danger, attempted to reload quickly. But after Jon knocked his weapon away, he drew his dao. Jon parried it with Dark Sister while bring his fist up, which held Longclaw, to strike hard across his face. Seeing him fall to the ground and kicking his dao away, the Goi man crawled away from him.

“Please don’t kill me,” he begged.

*Coward…* Jon thought vindictively. *Something quick is too good for him.* Stabbing Longclaw upright into the ground, he swung Dark Sister across the man’s unarmored chest, but made a cut that was not deep enough to instantly kill.

“You killed her, you piece of shit,” Jon said through gritted teeth. “I’m going to enjoy every moment of this.”

As the Goi man’s partner screamed, Jon slashed him multiple times with the blade of Visenya Targaryen, with each one becoming deeper than the last one. He cut the tendons of his legs first, so that he wouldn’t move. He then put cuts in his shoulders, so that the pain become more excruciating. Setting Dark Sister down, he then pulled out his dagger and buried it deep within his neck. But that wasn’t enough, as Jon then proceeded to stab him in the same spot multiple times, more than enough to cut the arteries around this throat.

Throwing the dagger down, Jon threw punches on each side of his face. “DIE!” he repeated with each blow to the cheek, his rage knowing no limits. He lost count of how many times he punched his face, but besides the cuts in his neck, the face was becoming swollen.

As a final touch, Jon pulled his head up and struck him with his forehead, causing the Goi man’s partner’s skull to slam back into the ground.

Breathing heavily, Jon began to survey the damage that he had done in his anger. As his rage subsided, the shock of his actions started to dawn on him. He had never expected for him to become so willing to commit such… violence on another man. It might have been justified in Jon’s mind, but it was still shocking since Jon didn’t think he was even capable of doing so.

Sensing someone staring at him, he looked up and saw another cavalryman looking at him, with his bow drawn. Jon gazed at the man, his gritted teeth and face and body soaked in blood all daring him to release that arrow.

The cavalryman hesitated, not expecting a white devil to be capable of the violence that he had just witnessed. A few moments passed, before the cavalrymen was struck with an arrow from another direction before falling down, dead.

Confused, Jon looked around and saw another group of cavalrymen, this one wearing imperial army uniforms compared to the smallfolk garments the attackers wore. He also saw who was leading them. “Uncle Benjen?”

The imperial cavalry attacked what remained of the rogue cavalrymen, who were either killed quickly or were subdued. Some of the uniformed horsemen surveyed the damage caused by the dragon and Ghost, as this was their first time seeing such creatures face-to-face.

But for Benjen, he moved his horse to where Jon was after seeing him. To say that he was stunned by the amount of blood he saw on his nephew was an understatement, as he shook at the sight of the mangled corpse that Jon was responsible for.
Dismounting, Benjen then noticed Chanhee’s body. Eyes widening, he then understood what Jon had done and moved to embrace him. “It’s okay, Jon. I don’t blame you. No one will,” he tried to comfort him.

After a few more moments of trying to process everything, Jon returned the embrace and began crying into his uncle’s armor.

They both stood there as Ghost and Meleys came near Jon, feeling the sadness in his heart after seeing Chanhee’s cold body. Both the direwolf and the dragon nuzzled themselves against their companion’s side, trying to offer as much comfort as they could like what Benjen was doing.

“Let it all out, Jon. Let it all out,” Benjen ran his hands across his nephew’s back, the tears bringing him back to when he had learned of Lyanna’s death. Although he didn’t have the relationship that Jon had with Chanhee, he understood the feeling and allowed whatever was happening to run its course. Just like he needed time when his older sister died, he would allow Jon to have his to mourn the loss of his first love.

Jon was now openly bawling, grabbing the rear of Benjen’s armor as he collapsed on his knees, with his uncle following him. Although he had cried when Lord Joon told him that Ned Stark was dead, the grief that he felt then was nothing compared to what he felt now.

As Benjen’s squadron captain started to oversee the mopping up of the surviving attackers, of which only two were caught, he was shocked to find imperial army-issued weapons on them, from the daos to even the tanegashima. He cautiously approached Benjen, who was trying to comfort his nephew as best as he could.

“Captain Stark,” the squadron captain told him. “I don’t think these are common raiders. They seem to be imperial cavalrmen, Goi by the looks of it.”

Benjen processed this. “Cavalrmen in disguise?” he whispered. “Then… whoever told them to attack my nephew and the group did not have official sanction.”

“Seems like it,” the squadron captain nodded.

“What’s going on here?” Sumeng moved his zorse to where Benjen, Jon, and the squadron captain were. Upon seeing his crown prince, the captain fell down prostrate on the ground.

“Your Imperial Highness,” he said in reverence.

Sumeng walked past him and stood in front of Benjen. “Who are you?”

“Brigade Captain Benjen Stark, commander of the Northwest Army’s flying column,” he answered. “I take it that you’re the Crown Prince.”

“Captain, you have to address the Crown Prince accordingly,” the squadron captain reminded him.

“It’s all right, soldier. Like Prince Daeron, he is a stranger to these lands, so I should ignore any lapses in decorum,” Sumeng replied. Looking at Benjen more closely, he immediately saw that they were related. “Are you his kin, Captain Stark?”

“I’m his uncle… Your Highness,” he answered.

Sumeng nodded before he looked at Chanhee’s body, sighing. “I must thank you for your intervention, Captain Stark. As much as I saw the zorsem being able to defend themselves, it’s good to finally see imperial troops, soldiers of the empire.”
“Just fulfilling my obligations,” Benjen kept rubbing Jon’s back as he continued to cry.

“I think we should go to Trader Town now,” Sumeng ordered Benjen.

However, the youngest son of Rickard Stark became upset at how the Crown Prince was ignoring all of the carnage around them because he wanted to go. “Your Highness, please allow my nephew a few moments. Don’t you see who he lost?”

“All right, but no more,” Sumeng gestured for the squadron captain to follow him.

“Come on, Jon. We have to go,” Benjen said to his nephew. “We’ll take her with us.”

Jon wiped his eyes before nodding, while his uncle helped place her body on her zorse. With the surviving zorsemen now protected by Benjen’s soldiers, they made their way down the Steel Road to Trader Town, while Jon kept his neck slumped in sadness but with less tears.

“Who gave you the orders to attack Sela and the Crown Prince in violation of the safe conducts I gave?” Joon asked one of the two surviving ambushers.

It took a lot of effort on his part to convince Sela the Hyrkoon that whatever happened to them did not take place without his official sanction, but her hesitance in accepting his hospitality was understandable given their attackers being imperial cavalrymen in disguise. Who had the nerve to defy my orders?

Once Benjen and his squadron captain handed over the two attackers, Joon had them both imprisoned in Trader Town’s prison. He took one out from his cell and had him strapped to a wooden chair without a seat. Stripping him of his garments, he had a torturer heat up a pair of tongs and sear his asshole. There were no words to describe the kind of screams that the prisoner let out.

“Please, general. I needed the money,” the prisoner pleaded.

“Who paid you then?”

“They’re going to kill me if I tell you.”

Joon grabbed his chin firmly. “You think I won’t do that if you don’t tell me? You’ve been caught without a uniform and you defied my orders. Both of those charges will lead to your death in the most excruciating way imaginable. You cannot escape it, but I am willing to commute your sentence to painless death if you tell me who paid you to attack the Jogos Nhai and the Crown Prince.”

The Goi man gulped. “I will die?”

“You stupid bastard!” Joon scoffed. “What did you expect to happen after you’ve done these heinous crimes? I will find out the truth, one way or another, but if you make my tasks easier, I will make sure that you don’t suffer. It is as simple as that.”

The Goi man mumbled to himself indistinctively, fearful of another touch of the hot tongs. Sighing and accepting his fate, he turned to Joon. “It was General Feng and the Tiqui magistrate who paid us to do it.”

“General Feng?” Joon wasn’t overly shocked. “I should’ve known. And the magistrate, you say?”
“Yes, general.”

Joon turned to the guard behind him. “Get word to the provosts. Tell them to arrest General Feng and the Tiqui magistrate. Kill any who might protect them.”

The guard nodded before running off.

“For your cooperation,” Joon turned back to the Goi man. “I sentence you to beheading. It will take place on the morrow.” The Goi man sighed and closed his eyes. “Take him back to his cell and get him to write down his confession. We’ll need it.”

Joon didn’t know need to know more about what General Feng and the magistrate had done. In truth, what the Goi man said merely provided him with the excuse he needed to remove them both from his side. The magistrate had been quite an annoyance for years now and General Feng was not exactly a good commander, but he couldn’t just remove them without just cause.

At the same time, both of them disobeyed him and that was something that couldn’t go unanswered. I’ll hold a trial for the both of them, even though General Feng is in the army. He can be held for insubordination and even mutiny, while I could try the magistrate for murder and willfully endangering the imperial family.

He had the Crown Prince quartered in the garrison commander’s house, where his first request was a bath. Not going to bother him, he went to the physician’s pavilion, where Jon was at for sure. And his uncle.

He saw both the direwolf and the dragon sitting outside of the pavilion, with guards and bureaucrats alike being afraid to go near them. But since both knew who Lord Joon was and that it was his house that they stayed out, they allowed him to pass.

Sure enough, he saw Jon sitting near the side of the table where Chanhee’s corpse was, the blood and dirt cleaned off and her being placed in clean clothes for her dignity. He was still bloodied and dirtied, but he didn’t seem to care as he continued to look at the body of his love. He also saw Benjen sitting next to his nephew, trying to be the support that he needed.

Seeing Joon enter, Benjen stood up and at attention while Jon ignored him. But he did not mind, as he understood since he never saw Jon in so much sorrow.

“I have confirmation on who carried out the attacks,” Joon said, catching Benjen’s attention. “It was General Ikken Feng and the magistrate. I can only surmise that the magistrate wanted Jon and Chanhee dead after he humiliated him at Tiqui and he must’ve convinced General Feng to be involved possibly after getting a bribe. By the end of today, both of them will be in a cell and they will be tried accordingly.”

“If that’s the case, then why don’t you just kill them?” Benjen wasn’t going to let the two men who had endangered his nephew’s life draw one more breath.

“Oh, I will make sure that they don’t escape their fates, but it has done properly.” Joon answered. “I also had the provosts cease their finding of Jon and Chanhee, since I believe the Crown Prince will provide extenuating circumstances.”

“As it should, general,” Benjen gestured to Jon. “My nephew must have retribution.”

“Naturally,” Joon assented as he turned to leave. “I’ll let you know of the details soon.”

He then made his way to the commander’s pavilion, to see what the Crown Prince had in store for
Jon. With the dragon and direwolf now revealed, he had to plan accordingly so that his hiding of Jon, Benjen, and Sam would not result in serious consequences for himself and his family.

Simultaneously, he prepared himself for Jon’s emotional state. Thankfully, Joon did not experience what it was like to lose the ones he loved, but he knew that it would leave a person incapacitated for weeks at the most. That was something that he couldn’t afford to let happen, as a prince of House Targaryen, especially the last male scion, had to stay alert and keep moving.

*I’m not his father, but why am I concerned with how Daeron can get himself out of this?*

Chapter End Notes

And... we have Jon's first personal loss besides Ned Stark. For those that saw it, Chanhee was the Ygritte stand-in, and so, she had to die. However much pain Jon is feeling now, he will soon move on and meet the woman that he was meant to be with. At the same time, there will be obstacles and more pain before that can happen.

The magistrate and the Trader Town commander tried to kill Jon, but they only managed to earn his ire. And they shall pay for their shortsightedness. Chanhee's death will progress the Yi-Ti arc and plot forward, as Jon has to enter more danger and learn more things about survival before he can truly take the mantle as a Targaryen ruler.

The dangers can only increase from here, so Jon better step out of his stupor soon and move to meet the new threats that will come.
Hope you all are doing well and are keeping safe. So much is happening still, but we can all get it through this together :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon sat on the side next to Benjen, observing the trials as they commenced.

It was fairly easy for the provosts to arrest Ikken Feng and the magistrate, since neither of them did not expect discovery of their crimes to happen so quickly. Like the magistrate, General Feng was in charge of a backwater post and had a poor reputation as an officer, so he did not put up a good resistance.

Since both of them committed crimes against the army and as General Feng was a military officer, the Provost-General would act as judge. When Jon asked why Lord Joon couldn’t be the judge, one of the officers told him that even though he had a lot of power as the Northwest Governor and Captain-General, there were limits to what he could do, as men who became too powerful and too much authority were the bane of the empire’s early existence. *If only Westeros learned that lesson…*

To everyone’s surprise, Prince Sumeng also attended the trial. As a member of the ruling family, he had to power to overrule any decision a magistrate might make, but strangely, he chose to observe. Him sitting next to Jon opposite of Benjen caused murmurs amongst the officers and any other curious observers.

“What are you doing here, Prince Sumeng?” Jon was honestly confused.

“Have to see what will be done with the men who endangered me. Unlike the first time, I shall see how this will proceed. But… if it goes in a way that I don’t like, I’ll step in and overrule the court.”

Although Joon rescinded his order for Jon’s arrest, the Lord of Kushiro didn’t actually pardon him since he and Chanhee were still seen as responsible for the Goi cavalrymen’s deaths. However, Sumeng declared that Jon and Chanhee were not responsible for their deaths given the arrest of the magistrate and General Feng and thus had them acquitted using his own seal. *If only Chanhee was alive to see that…*

“I must thank you for what you’ve done, Prince Sumeng.”

“It’s the least that I can do, Prince Daeron.”

“And as you know, Chanhee died as she helped rescued you. What provisions will you make for her kin?” Jon wanted to know.

“Right.” Sumeng didn’t seem too pleased to associate himself further with steppes people, which irritated Jon. “I will see to it that her kin are compensated for their loss and that they receive privileges from the empire. After all, the Chogo gained much goodwill from what their daughter did.”
Jon wanted to slap him there. *Is that what you really think? Is that really on your mind?* He knew that Sumeng was haughty and treated those he viewed as beneath him like shit, but this was Chanhee he was talking about and he was beyond revolted at how insensitive he was being. *If you really think that compensation and privileges will be enough, then you’re not just foolish. You’re a cold bastard.* But he dared not make his thoughts known, not after what Sumeng did for him however much of a shit he was being. In addition, it wouldn’t have mattered, as much as Jon found it hard to accept.

“This trial will now come to order,” the Provost-General announced. “Major-General Ikken Feng, you stand accused of the crimes of insubordination and attempted mutiny. How do you plead?”

General Feng scoffed. “This court’s a sham. Arranged at the behest of white devils by a man whose family enjoyed the privileges of the empire for generations. I will find no justice here.”

“How do you plead, General Feng?”

“I will say no more on this matter,” Feng kept up his defiance.

“So, as you offered no clear plea on the charges against you, I shall assume that you plead guilty.” Feng remained silent. “All right, then. You have been guilty of insubordination and attempted mutiny, as well as willfully endangering the Crown Prince with your actions, crimes that you would have been guilty of anyway with the confession of one of the creatures that you had utilized in this matter. You are hereby sentenced to death and shall be filled with arrows until dead. Afterwards, you will be removed from the officer books and be demoted to a common footman.”

The officers and observers all nodded their agreement, as did Benjen, Lord Joon, and Sumeng, Jon just kept staring at Feng, looking forward to seeing him die as the Provost-General described.

“Xun Hayashi, Magistrate of Tiqui. You are hereby charged with the crimes of murder, conspiracy to commit a crime, and willfully endangering the Crown Prince. How do you plead?” the Provost-General moved on as General Feng was taken away.

Unsurprisingly, the magistrate was crying and shaking uncontrollably, with the twitching in his face adding to the sheer pathetic display. The observers and a few of the officers jeered at the fat official, his previous misconduct against the people having caused much discontent that all came back with a vengeance.

“Not guilty,” he managed to say, earning more taunting from the observers. One of the guards pounded his spear hard.

“Order!” the Provost-General commanded. “I guess I have to thank you for answering a plea, as we might have a chance to examine the evidence. Captain, bring them forth.”

The next hour was spent going over the magistrate’s books, hearing testimonies to those who criticized his character, and the most damning of all, the confession from the Goi man who carried out the ambush.

“That is a lie, a last attempt by a man trying to save his own skin,” the magistrate weakly offered.

“A man who you paid to kill Daeron Targaryen, a payment that you foolishly recorded in your records,” the provost’s captain shot back. “More importantly, the confession was written by a man who had nothing left to lose, so he made the right decision in revealing the truth to us.”

“Do you wish to know a bigger crime, soldier? The fact that a white devil dared to interfere in one of my court proceedings and humiliated an imperial official in public,” the magistrate pointed to
Jon, who felt unmoved.

“Do not bring in past occurrences that are not relevant to the current charges,” admonished the Provost-General.

“You shouldn’t have written your payments in your books. What is worse, you risked the Crown Prince’s life just so that you can achieve your own petty revenge. Along with the confession, there is no doubt of your guilt, which I trust the court to have established, and therefore, the magistrate abused his authority and is guilty.”

The Provost-General nodded in thought. “Xun Hayashi, for crimes of murder, conspiracy to commit a crime, and willfully endangering the Crown Prince, I find you guilty. You are hereby sentenced to death, by beheading.”

The observers cheered, satisfied that the official who ill-treated them was getting the comeuppance he deserved, while the officers were relieved that the trial was over. Lord Joon and Prince Sumeng were visibly pleased, as the ones who caused them trouble would be dealt with. Benjen saw satisfaction in the deaths of those who had endangered his nephew, while Jon smiled at those who were responsible for Chanhee’s death.

Jon, Benjen, Lord Joon, and Prince Sumeng were among those that came out to the archery range, where Feng had his armor and swords ceremoniously removed from his person and dressed in simple white robes. He was then tied to a post, with twenty archers facing him.

The provost’s captain pulled out a scroll which detailed the sentence one last time. “Ikken Feng, the Provost-General of the Northwest Army has found you guilty of insubordination and attempted mutiny. If you have any last words, you may speak them now.”

“All of you can go to the deepest hells, for I shall be waiting for you there,” Feng still kept his insolence even near death.

The captain turned his head to the archers. “Detail ready! Nock!” They pulled back on their bows as they took aim. “Loose!”

Twenty arrows found their mark, all of them in Feng’s torso. Blood spilled from his mouth as his head hung forward, a sign that he was dead.

The magistrate was placed on a block in the middle square of Trader Town, where a crowd formed to see the hated official die. Like in the court, he was bawling and couldn’t control his fear, but he had pissed himself as they dragged him to where he would meet his end.

But before the headsman was about to do the deed, Jon decided to show the magistrate what he had told him the first time they had met.

“Lord Joon, please allow me to carry out this execution,” Jon said to him.

“Why do you wish to burden yourself with such trivial matters?”

“The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword,” Jon remembered Ned’s words.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you, but that’s not how things work here. There are rules and there are protocols to follow. We’re not in Westeros, Daeron.”

“General, please allow him to do this,” Benjen joined in. “As his uncle and as a descendant of the First Men, I wholeheartedly support his decision. It might also help his healing if he ended the life
of the man who took the life of the one he had loved. Life can be cruel in denying us the satisfaction from the things that have wronged us, so please, don’t let him feel that way.”

Joon exhaled before talking to the headsman. After getting paid his usual fee of ten silver taels from Joon’s pouch, the headsman gestured for Jon to come.

“Which blade do you want?” Benjen held out Longclaw and Dark Sister.

Wanting to emulate what Ned Stark did, Jon chose the bigger blade. With Longclaw unsheathed, the crowd silenced as the white devil stepped forward with Valyrian steel to where the magistrate was.

The provost’s captain read out the charges before asking if he had any last words. “Please! Don’t kill me! I’ll give you anything! Please spare me!”

His pleas only made Jon angrier. “You wish to live, but you were willing to kill others? You gutless fuck!” he shouted.

The magistrate cried once more, but not before begging one more time. “Please! I want to live! I don’t want to die!”

Fingers gripping tighter around Longclaw’s hilt, Jon raised the blade and brought it down to the magistrate’s neck, making quick work of the flesh and bone and his head quickly falling to the ground.

Lord Joon was not surprised at how Jon wanted to do it himself, while Sumeng was struck at how committed and hands-on his princely acquaintance continued to be.

“People of Trader Town,” Lord Joon addressed them. “Today, you have justice properly carried out. By the grace of the gods have they allowed it to happen, and for our Crown Prince to return safely. Let this day be remembered for a long time!”

Lord Joon bowed his head to Prince Sumeng, with the others in the square doing the same, including the other officers.

“Tennoheika, banzai!” Joon threw his fists up as he yelled the nihongo hail for the emperor and the family.

“Banzai!” they cheered.

“Banzai!”

“Banzai!”

“BANZAI!” The last time was louder.

“BANZAI!”

Jon and Benjen observed, while Sumeng basked in their praises.

_I wonder how his father is going to react when people remember that he lost one hundred thousand men_, Jon thought.

Sam ate in the dining room along with Jon, Benjen, Lord Joon, his wife and children, and the Crown Prince seated at the head of the low table, with a few members of the imperial guard just
outside the room and more in Kushiro’s courtyard and on the walls. He had never contemplated seeing those who belonged to any sovereign family, be it the Baratheons or the Targaryens. But in the span of almost a year, he had met both the last male scion of House Targaryen and now the Crown Prince of the Golden Empire of Yi-Ti. *Ever since Jon, or Daeron, came into my life, so many things that I have never thought would happen had happened.*

While Jon and Benjen were with the army in the steppes for the past few weeks, Seong Kitara started to delegate more responsibilities to Sam besides collecting taxes. Part of the duties of Lord Joon’s office was to ensure that local administration continued to run even in the midst of crises. As Seong was already occupied with the duties associated with Kushiro, he had Sam go out to the various farming communities that answered directly to the Kitara family and see whether there were any issues that would be causes for concern. The son of Randyll Tarly was unsure of his ability to interact with those people on Lord Joon’s behalf, as he was a white devil and had no knowledge of the local workings, but after hearing what Seong said before Meleys flew out of Kushiro, he complied.

On his first day, Sam went to the village of Asanyo and found himself addressing the village chief, who answered to the captain of a company of former soldiers who were recalled to active duty to the army when the Crown Prince was captured. Both of them were surprised that a white devil was acting on Lord Joon’s behalf, but they relented when he showed them the seal of the Kitara family. After being offered tea, he talked with both the village chief and the company captain about the affairs of Asanyo, which sat on the road to Tiqui. Even though they were far from any immediate danger from the Jogos Nhai, there were still fears from the village since the presence of the former soldiers means that the regular army could not give them the protection they needed from any other dangers, indicating how serious the situation was.

“I assure you that Lord Kitara is doing everything within his power to resolve the current situation and that the former soldiers can all expect to go back to their homes soon,” Sam spoke in guanhua.

“How do you know that? Do you have any information regarding the current campaign of the army?” the company captain asked.

“The last I have heard, they were making steady progress northwards towards where the Crown Prince was captured and one hundred thousand troops under his command were wiped out,” Sam answered.

“So, they haven’t found the Crown Prince and so far, we have to keep the soldiers in our village,” the chief sounded exasperated.

Sam almost forgot that the villagers valued normality above many things, and the presence of troops in their home, no matter how small of a number they were, represented a disruption in that. It was not that different back in Westeros, as armed men raging through towns and villages were always an unwelcome sight, even if it was ostensibly for their protection. “Do you trust Lord Joon to reach a speedy conclusion to the campaign?”

“There is no reason why I shouldn’t,” the chief said. “The governor has done much good for the people of this province and there has been much peace within these lands. He is a man of his word.”

“Then, you should trust my words, because I am acting on his behalf. Lord Joon will accomplish the mission from the Prime Minister and there will be normality returning quickly. And besides, you are very far removed from the main areas of action, so you have little to nothing to worry about,” Sam answered.
“I hope that is true, for the amount of time we spend here is time lost on the fields,” the company captain explained. “I might have passed the examinations, but I have to work the fields also because my family is comparatively poorer stock than most of those who could afford to send their sons to study. I have to return to my farms and to my harvests, or my family will struggle.”

“Remind me again, captain. How long have you served?” Sam forgot.

“Seven years commanding infantrymen,” the captain answered. “But I had to go leave active duty when my family fell on hard times. Now, I am the same rank that I was over fifteen years ago and for officers, there is no such thing as leaving your commission, as the empire seeks to retain those who passed the examinations in case of times such as these.”

Sam nodded in understanding. “I see your reasons more clearly. And as I said before, all of you can expect to return to where you were before all of this very soon. All of us here have at least some understanding of Lord Joon’s capabilities, so we should place our trust in them.”

The village chief and the company captain sighed before bobbing their heads in agreement.

And that was the routine that Sam assumed when he moved from one village to the next. All shared similar concerns, but all trusted Lord Joon enough to place their trust in him. Maybe this is part of the reason why Lord Joon has so much control here. Once he gives his word, he keeps it no matter what, even if he has to resort to more... questionable tactics to do so.

After Sam was returning to Kushiro upon the completion of a trip to another village, Seong told him that Lord Joon was returning, with the Crown Prince, Jon, and Benjen. He was surprised, since he never expected to meet an important person like Prince Sumeng, but his surprise turned to happiness when he heard that he would see Jon and Benjen again. They made it, he mused.

But he saw that Seong didn’t mention Chanhee. “Lord Seong, what about Chanhee, the Chogo woman? Is she coming also?” He might not have had the type of relationship that Jon had with her, but he did like her company.

Seong’s eyes darkened. “I think you better come with me. What I should say to you is not meant for any ears.”

“Of course,” but Sam grew increasingly concerned. Once they reached a private space in Kushiro’s main keep, Seong had him sit down. “What’s going on?”

Seong swallowed. “Chanhee’s dead.”

That hit Sam like ice-cold water. “Dead? What do you mean she’s dead?”

“It’s a long story, from what I was told.”

“I’m right here.”

Seong told Sam about what he heard, from Chanhee and Jon rescuing the Crown Prince from the Jogos Nhai renegades, being picked up by Sela the Hyrkoon, Lord Joon arranging an exchange for their lives, and their ambush by a group of treacherous imperial cavalrymen directed by the magistrate in Tiqui and Major-General Ikken Feng, garrison commander of Trader Town. Meleys and Ghost helped fend off the ambushers while Benjen and his troops mopped up the rest, but Chanhee was shot with an iron ball and she bled out in Jon’s arms.

Sam shut his eyes, shaking his head while sighing. Poor Jon. He couldn’t imagine what kind of pain he must’ve felt at losing someone he had grown very close with. “And?”
“Both General Feng and the magistrate were arrested and executed for their crimes, as they did endanger the Crown Prince through their shortsightedness. They also told me that Jon cut off the magistrate’s head himself.”

_Of course he would do that._ “That’s just Jon sticking to the ways of the First Men, in which the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

“Well, not exactly. To others, he might be seen as someone acting vengefully, not that that anyone would blame him,” Seong shrugged.

“True,” Sam admitted.

“Anyways, expect the Crown Prince and my father to arrive within a week. I need your help making the necessary preparations, such as getting enough food prepared for the feasts and making sure that there are enough rooms for the Crown Prince and whoever is attending to him,” Seong told Sam.

“Understood,” Sam concurred.

A week later, he, alongside Seong, Lady Myung, and Komo and Karasa, alongside the household of Kushiro, stood in the courtyard awaiting the arrival of the Crown Prince. Lady Myung and the Kitara daughters all dressed in their brightest robes yet, while Seong wore his cleanest garments and tied his swords to his waist. The Kushiro guard, all lead by Hoon Ti, were dressed in their armor and had their weapons tidied up so as to present a good image for those employed by the Kitara family. _So much importance on appearances, just like in Westeros._

A rider strode through the opened Kushiro’s opened gates and dismounted just before Sam and the immediate Kitara family. Dismounting his horse, he looked around the castle, as if searching for any immediate threats to the Crown Prince or whoever was approaching. _Ridiculous._

Seeming to be satisfied, the rider pulled out a whistle and blew on it. As if on cue, more riders entered the courtyard, followed by who appeared to be officers. All were armed with daos, lances, bows, and the “shortarm” versions of the tanegashima. They also wore golden jackets over hardened leather armor with steel studs and conical helmets resembling those worn by the farmers.

“Who are they?” Sam asked Seong.

“They’re part of the imperial guard,” Seong answered. “Special troops whose sole purpose is to protect the emperor and his family. They’re handpicked from the best soldiers the empire has to offer, but it’s an honorary institution as much as it is an active one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Men who are granted the right to wear the golden jackets are given a high place of honor at court, which usually is limited to those who achieved great merit for the emperor. My own father also has the right to wear the golden jacket, but he chooses not to wear it because he doesn’t want to be reminded of the last time he was in the capital,” Seong explained.

“Something bad happened to him?”

“Let us just say that… had my father remain there, his survival would’ve been much harder to maintain among the snakes there,” Seong replied cryptically.

“Understood,” Sam didn’t need to hear more.

After the imperial guard stood at attention, a rider on a clean white horse and wearing golden
garments with a phoenix embroidered on his back and wearing a golden band over his hair bun rode into the courtyard. Upon seeing him, the household of Kushiro, Seong, Lady Myung, and the Kitara daughters bowed very low and reverently. This must be Prince Sumeng, Sam thought followed suit.

Finally, Lord Joon rode through the gates of his home, followed by Benjen, Jon, and Quartermaster Shin. All dismounted while one of the guards saw to Prince Sumeng’s horse. The Crown Prince strode up to where Sam and the Kitara family stood. “You Seong Kitara?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Seong answered formally.

“And you must be Samwell Tarly, friend of Daeron Targaryen?”

He knows? “Yes… Your Highness.”

Sumeng bid them and the household to stand back up. “Any friend of Prince Daeron is a friend of mine. He saved my life.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Sam answered.

“Lady Myung,” Sumeng turned to the lady of Kushiro. “I won’t burden you and your house unnecessarily. I shall use your home for a few days before we proceed back to the capital.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Lady Myung responded.

“Show me to the accommodations, then,” Sumeng pointed to the main keep before Lady Myung and the Kitara daughters lead the prince and a few of his guards on.

Sam and Seong turned to Lord Joon, Benjen, and Jon. While the Lord of Kushiro embraced his son, Sam looked at his friend and his Stark uncle. Both were very sullen, especially Jon, the reason being known to him.

“Are you all right?” Sam asked the both of them.

“We’re both okay,” Benjen answered. “Though the last few weeks have been trying for all of us.”

“I understand,” Sam offered. “If there is anything that I can do to help you, please let me know.”

“Appreciate that, Sam,” Benjen said.

He wanted to talk to Jon more about Chanhee, but realized that it would be unwise, especially in the open. “Let’s get you two back to our rooms. And we should rest. I imagine tonight to be very trying for us all.”

As Sam was brought back to the supper with the Crown Prince, he observed how the heir to the Golden Empire conducted himself at the table. As expected, the way that he handled his hashi and his spoon all spoke of how… dignified he was supposed to be. From taking small bits of rice and seared chicken and pork at a time, to chewing slowly, to holding his teacup in a certain way, and sitting up very straight, in a pose that would have become very uncomfortable after a while.

Also, they all waited for the Crown Prince to eat first and did not eat faster or slower than he did. From what Sam learned, to finish earlier or later than a member of the sovereign family was considered very rude and a breach in etiquette. And I thought Horn Hill and the Reach was so restrictive.
“Lord Joon,” Prince Sumeng spoke.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Joon put his hashi down.

“I believe it’s time that you return to the capital. It’s been years since you’ve graced the court with your presence, and you should receive a just reward for how you handled this whole affair.”

Joon cleared his throat. “I’m honored, Your Highness. However, I have duties to attend to in this province and my prolonged absence from Kushiro have already caused enough of stresses on my family already.”

“I hear that your son managed well while you were in the field, my lord. If you wish for your family and your home to be in good hands, your son should begin to assume the responsibilities that he had for the long-term. In addition, it’s not wise for the governor of one of our most important provinces to be long absent from court despite the circumstances of your last appearance, if you understand my meaning,” Sumeng put in plain words.

Like Joon, Sam caught the Crown Prince’s words. Given the empire’s bloody history with unruly lords and how much pain that previous dynasties and emperors had to go through to ensure that no lordly house would rise up against the throne again, lords appearing at court seemed understandable. But why now?

“With respect, why do you wish for me to appear in court, after over ten years?” Joon asked.

“Someone has to report to the court the occurrences in this province, and it’s been far too long since a family from the northern parts of the empire has appeared in court. If we are to maintain a united empire, everyone must be represented,” answered Sumeng.

“What about the army, Your Highness? Someone has to continue the command.”

“Do not worry, my lord. You will remain in command of the Northwest Army, but your quartermaster and adjutant can assume responsibilities in your absence.”

Joon saw that there was no convincing the prince otherwise, and any further doubting would send the wrong message, which he couldn’t allow to happen. “I’ll make the necessary arrangements, Your Highness.”

Prince Sumeng nodded in satisfaction before turning to Sam. “So, I was able to hear many things about you, Samwell of House Tarly.”

“You have, Your Highness?” Sam was caught off guard.

“Who your family is, what you’ve done for the Kitara family, and so on,” the prince continued eating. “For a white devil like yourself, being able to communicate in our tongues, and dealing with important matters of a province, that’s quite impressive.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Which is why I am inviting you to come to the capital with myself, Prince Daeron, Captain Stark, and Lord Joon. Perseverance can go a long way in court, so you’ll do fine there.”

Sam let out a chuckle, moved by his praise. “You honor me very much, Your Highness. And wherever my friend Prince Daeron goes, I will happily go.”

“Excellent. I will see to it that you are given a position that will be most compatible with your
abilities. People should not be hidden from the public view,” Prince Sumeng stared at Lord Joon, but he shrugged it off by returning the stare.

Sam, meanwhile, knew what Sumeng was indicating. “Apologies, Your Highness, but I’m sure that Lord Joon had his reasons. After all, how many people will be concerned with the presence of three white devils in this empire, especially with a white direwolf and a live dragon with them? There were many unknowns and given the character of Lord Joon, he must’ve taken the cautious but wise route in keeping our existence hidden.”

Lord Joon gave a small smile to Sam, appreciating the son of House Tarly defending him.

“How interesting… you haven’t known Lord Joon for long and yet, you are willing to stand up for his actions,” Sumeng noted. “Makes me more curious as to what exactly went on around here. Then again, court is always full of interesting stories and life would not be interesting without them, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sam pursed his lips, not wanting to think about the things that made his life different than others. “I guess you’re right, Your Highness.”

“Course I am,” Sumeng smiled as he drank his tea. Setting his hashi down, he stood up, while the rest of the family and guards followed suit. “I’m afraid I must retire for the night. I trust that I have the lord’s quarters, Lord Joon?”

“All yours, Your Highness,” Joon affirmed.

“Make the preparations you need. We will leave for the capital by the end of the week.”

Sam sat in the room he, Jon, and Benjen occupied. All of them were very quiet, not having said a word since they arrived back at Kushiro. He couldn’t fault them, since Chanhee was no longer with them. At the same time, he couldn’t just be silent to his friend, the only he had.

“Jon, you excited about going to the capital? I’m sure that there are many things we can do over there, just like at Asabhad,” Sam tried to steer his attention towards something else. He remained unresponsive. *Okay, that didn’t work. Maybe this will cheer him up.*

“Jon, I’ve recently got word from Westeros. Your cousin Robb, King in the North, has triumphed against the Lannisters at Oxcross, the Red Fork, and is laying waste to the westerlands. Meanwhile, the Baratheons are killing each other, with word that Stannis and Renly about to make their moves on King’s Landing. Less stags to worry about, I guess.”

Jon sighed, while Benjen got interested. “So, my nephew is proving himself not a green boy after all, huh?”

“I guess so,” Sam answered. “Quite something, since he’s fighting the wits of the great Tywin Lannister himself. Maybe if he wins more battles, he might have a chance.”

“I don’t know about that, Sam. Battles may determine wars, but there are a lot of things that are involved in victory. It’s those things I’m worried about, since Robb is still quite inexperienced. I just hope he knows what he’s doing,” Benjen assessed.

Jon smiled, apparently proud of what his cousin had achieved all on his own. But… he was still withdrawn.

Sam shifted closer to him, now seeing that his attempts to cheer up his friend were not working. “Jon, I’m not going to pretend to know how you feel, because I don’t know what loss is. And I
won’t offer any words like ‘I will miss her,’ because I can sense that missing her doesn’t come close to what you felt with her. But I just want you to know that you don’t have to do this alone. Benjen’s here, and so am I.”

Jon looked at Sam, his eyes softening from the darkened look that he carried ever since he returned.

“In addition, remember why we’re here. If we don’t return with help, your family and my family will suffer from what will come. We need to stay focused for them, no matter how much of a bastard my father was,” Sam admitted.

Benjen looked as if he would scold him, but Jon stopped him by putting his hand on his shoulder. He let out a heavy sigh.

“Thank you, Sam. But I shouldn’t burden you with this. Whatever happened… has to be on my shoulders only, no one else’s. You don’t need any more things to worry about, as I’m sure that there will be plenty of that when we’re in the capital.”

“So, you are going?”

“Can’t really say that I have a choice in this, Sam. At the same time, we all knew that we couldn’t stay here forever, no matter how much we liked it.”

“There might be others who will try to use you because of your dragon, just like with Prince Sumeng, I imagine,” Sam warned.

“I know,” Jon said. “But maybe… that could be something that I could use for my own advantage. Allows me to see which people I can approach and which to watch out for.”

Sam bobbed his head. “Sounds acceptable.”

Jon started to lay down on his sheets. “Now, get some sleep. We’ve got a busy few days ahead of us.”

Sam also covered himself with his sheets while Benjen also went to where he slept. “Good night, Jon.”

“Good night, Sam.”

“Sweet dreams,” Benjen said before he fell asleep.

A few days later, they went traveled from Kushiro southwards to Asabhad, the city haven’t changed a bit in the last time Sam was there. But all of the officials gave their reverences to the Crown Prince while Sam continued to show himself as a proper man who knew etiquette by enjoying every dish they provided. They didn’t stay in Asabhad for long, as they continued towards Yin.

Sam only heard rumors about what the capital was like, but he knew better than to trust hearsay and would let himself experience the city without the words of someone else who claimed to have been there. *Whatever dangers we may face there, please protect us*, he prayed to the old gods, having converted from the Seven.
Since there was much evidence against them, the trial went as expected. As for Jon, his beheading of the magistrate was more personal than with Janos Slynt, since Mr. "I have friends at court" was involved in Ned's death while the magistrate was responsible for killing someone closer to Jon's heart.

And whatever Sumeng is planning with Joon and the three Westerosi is still mysterious, though all of them have enough sense to understand that they're about to enter a more dangerous set of circumstances than before. On the bright side, no one is getting left behind.

Be prepared for some new additions and some unexpected turns when we finally arrive at the capital.
Repyaments Galore

Chapter Notes

Hope you all are staying safe in these uncertain times. Also, quick update. Things will be busy ahead as I prepare for jobs and all that, and I will try my best to update regularly. But please bear with me if I don't seem consistent in my postings.

Really big shoutout to those who reviewed and those who pitched in their help for this fic (looking at especially you, Longclaw!)

Without ado, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The captains and first officers, alongside the officers attached to each ship, stood at attention as the winds of the sea blew against their faces, robes, and armor. All of the members of each crew on each ship also stood straight, lining the sides of their vessel in preparation. They had brought out their best dress and cleaned them as thoroughly as they could, for today was one unlike any other.

The officers and sailors of the Imperial Eastern Naval District, based at Jinqi, had served under their High Admiral for the last five years and they had been vigilant under his command under any threats that came from the Shadowlands. The imperial navy was divided between three main fleets, all of whom were responsible for maintaining security on the high seas in the regions where they were concerned. The Western Naval District, based at Asabhad, was responsible for safeguarding the approach from the west via Qarth, and the Central Naval District was under the Emperor's personal command in Yin. Although postings at the Central District were prestigious, it was well-known that the most of them were occupied by those closely connected with court and were not professional naval officers. If one wanted to make a career with the fleet, they had more chances at either Jinqi or Asabhad.

But the command at Jinqi was also the most-sought after for officers, given that the eastern fleet had to also keep Leng in line. Although Leng was part of the empire and had imperial commissioners working on behalf of the emperor, they had autonomy at the local level, with the ruler of the island also called "empress" and essentially ruling the island as her own kingdom. One of the conditions of the relationship between the Lengii and the YiTish was that for every soldier in the army and ship in the fleet of Leng, there would be twenty ships and twenty soldiers for the empire.

At the same time, the Lengii were not pushovers. The Lengii were the tallest known race of all peoples in the world, with some reaching seven or eight feet in height. They were a slender people known for their beauty and having skin the color of oiled teak, alongside their large eyes golden in color said to grant them superior vision over other peoples. Those people caused quite a bit of pain to every YiTish expedition sent against them, but the Lengii were also not stupid in thinking that they could withstand against the vast resources of the empire forever. Just like with the nihonjin people of the north, the Lengii got concessions in exchange for an advantageous relationship with the empire. It proved quite profitable for especially Lengii silk merchants, who gained access to the many markets of the Golden Empire.

At the moment, there were six hundred warships under the imperial banner, with the Jinqi fleet
comprised of one hundred and seventy-five ships, all of which were heavily armed with cannon and ship-mounted hwacha and manned by a total of sixteen thousand crewmen and two thousand officers, along with other smaller supply ships.

The placement of the Jinqi fleet was also important for the empire, as many of the officers spoke goryeomal as their first language and thus represented the eastern provinces. Given the rebellion of centuries before, having officers from those provinces who served under the imperial banner accomplished the goal of integrating a previously troublesome people into the emperor's service. And it wasn't uncommon for officers to converse in goryeomal instead of the nihongo spoken in the army and in the rest of the fleet.

The only exception to this rule was the current commander, Admiral Yingjie Okamoto, who came from a mixed background of northern noble blood and a southern merchant family who purchased nobility after currying favor at court. He proved different than most commanders, in that he didn't try to suppress the cultural practices of most of the officers in the Jinqi fleet and actually took the time to learn the goryeomal tongue. Thus, he gained the respect of all of the captains and first officers in the eastern fleet. But like many good things, it now came to an end, as Admiral Okamoto had been called to court to take a new position as First High Admiral, effectively making him commander of the imperial fleet underneath the emperor.

The captains and first officers were all sad to see him go, but today was special as Princess Khiara Bu of the azure line, the only daughter of the emperor, was coming personally to install the new commander of the Jinqi fleet. Whoever was coming to take Admiral Okamoto's place seemed to enjoy great confidence from the imperial family, which could only mean that things would change.

One of the captains, who stood alongside the others on the flagship as was customary whenever a new commander would be appointed, whispered to the captain on his left. "I hear that the Princess Khiara is quite a beauty to look at."

"Not surprising, given that her mother was a Lengii noblewoman and thus taking her people's good looks," the other captain answered.

"But unlike her brother the Crown Prince, I hear that she actually knows what she's doing," another captain joined in.

"Watch it!" the captain who started the conversation hissed. "That's treason to speak of the Crown Prince in that manner."

"Of course. But considering his loss of over one hundred thousand men in the north, I don't think the emperor himself will let him off with a light punishment," that captain replied.

"No disrespect to the Crown Prince, but people say that the only reason why he's still alive is because he's the emperor's only son by his Lengii queen. He has two other sons, but they are his concubines and so cannot inherit the thrones," the conversation continued amongst the captains.

"I heard that Prince Yujin is older than Prince Sumeng, but he's the worst in temperament. Someone at the palace told me that he once killed a servant because he didn't like the tea served to him."

"Really?"

"But Prince Yujin is a deadly warrior, trained by a shinobi assassin himself. So, don't expect for him to fight fairly in a duel, if the gods are twisted enough to let that happen to any of us."
The captains chuckled at that.

"What about the other prince? This... Kaijin?"

"Many people, at least the ones not allied with Prime Minister Shu, want him to inherit the throne instead of the Crown Prince. Like Prince Yujin, he's great with weapons and in unarmed combat, trained by warrior monks. But unlike Prince Yujin, he does have a sense of decency and people say he doesn't have any designs on the throne. In fact, he spends more time in the army and the navy than he does at court."

It was custom for princes to have commissions in both the army and the fleet, since they were expected to command no matter their experience due to having the emperor's blood. But most, like Prince Sumeng, didn't take their military duties seriously.

"Anyone know of what this Kaijin is like as a commander?"

"He's not the best from what I hear, but he's competent and given more time, he might become a good one. Pity that he's not political, as he would have a lot of support if he did."

The captain who began the discussion then decided to switch to another topic. "What has anyone heard of our new commander?"

"He was once a pirate and a raider, but was captured by the fleet," that fact shocking many of the captains. "But the admiral in Asabhad offered him a deal, which was to work under him as a captain in the navy and hunt down his crew in exchange for his life. That man sold out his crew and thus served the emperor for the last ten years. I also heard that he married a woman from a noble family well-connected at court, who got him promoted since his background as a pirate made that impossible in normal circumstances."

"Of course," one captain scoffed.

"Now, he's a rich man and has a powerful sponsor. But why the Princess is coming here to oversee his appointment still baffles me."

"We'll just have to wait and see."

Suddenly, the captains stopped talking as they heard horns blare, their deep, droning echoes piercing through the previous calm of the sea. They were followed by the pounding of drums in a slow rhythm, which gradually became faster. The captains prepared themselves, as the drums meant that whoever was coming to take command was near.

Then, twenty men who wore the golden jacket of the imperial guard stepped onto the plank connecting the flagship to the dock. Lining the way, they all dipped their heads when the captains saw a woman taller than usual come onto their ship.

Adorned in a white silk gown, with a long flowing skirt that seemed only just sufficient to cover her elongated legs and was tight against her thin frame, the woman's hair was tied back in a bun, which thus revealed her nicely-formed ears, her sharp jawline, her long neck, and her distinct cheekbones. Although her garments were not as revealing as the rest of mother's people, they didn't need to be.

She also had the pale white skin, thin black eyeliner, sapphire earrings, a gold necklace, silver bracelets, and a small crown around her bun. Both her crown and her gowns were adorned with the phoenix, the creature that best symbolized imperial power.
She was followed a retinue of ten ladies-in-waiting, who all wore white silk gowns but were not as adorned as the woman they walked behind. But the captains saw closely that half of the women had swords and daggers tied to their waists, but they were hidden in their robes.

The captains had only heard of the existence of the Jade Order, which was a group of highborn women selected for combat training and tasked with defending the female members of the imperial family as there were a few places where male bodyguards couldn't go to protected them. Although the court laughed at the idea of women fighting at first, they distinguished themselves in against the shadowmen from Asshai by protecting a queen from the maroon line. But this was the first time they had seen them, as imperial princesses rarely ventured outside of Yin, meaning that something serious was happening.

From all of those details alone, her imperial descent was obvious. With the entry of Princess Khiara on their ship, all of the captains bowed deeply and averted their gaze. At the same time, a sailor blew his coxswain whistle, signaling that a figure of high rank had just came on board.

Khiara walked by the captains as she walked towards the captain's observer deck, where she took her seat. After she sat down and the women of the Jade Order took positions on both sides, a man dressed in naval uniform, who was grizzled and had white hair peppering his black hair and beard while the former was tied back, walked past the imperial guard and fell prostrate before her.

"Your Imperial Highness," he addressed her while still keeping his eyes on the deck.

"Rise, Admiral Geon," she bid him to stand up. Although he stood up, he kept staring down. "Quite a progression you have received. From a pirate to now an admiral in the fleet."

"It's a beginning that I am not proud of, Your Imperial Highness. But I am glad that I was able to acquit myself through the many years of service to the empire."

"Indeed, which is why the emperor has found it fitting to make you the new commander of the Imperial Eastern Naval District," Khiara remain dignified. "Your appointment shall last for five years, unless the emperor has decided to keep you here longer. Make sure that you prove yourself to the task of ensuring security between the empire, Leng, and the shadowlands."

"I shall, Your Highness," Geon affirmed.

"Admiral Okamoto," Khiara called forth the outgoing commander. An elderly man who was about to reach his fifties, the years had been kind to him, as he nevertheless maintained a good physique and looked younger than his age. He followed his successor in bowing before the princess.

"Your Imperial Highness," Okamoto addressed her.

"You have distinguished yourself greatly and it pleases the emperor to appoint you High First Admiral of the Fleet."

"I am truly honored, Your Highness, and I thank His Augustness in the chance he has given me to serve him."

"I am sure of that. Also, I have been authorized in granting you another reward."

Admiral Okamoto blinked. "What else does he wish to grant me, Your Highness?"

"It pleases myself and my family to raise you as a lord in your own right," Khiara stood up and walked toward the two commanders of the fleet. "From this day forward, you shall be known as Yingjie Okamoto, Lord of Changlo. You will also be granted lands in the southeastern province,
which will provide you and your family an annual income of fifteen thousand silver taels."

Okamoto bowed lower. "Th-thank you, Your Highness."

Khiara chuckled. "Do not thank me, Lord Yingjie. Thank His Augustness when you do see him."

"I shall, Your Highness."

Now with ceremony over, Khiara left the flagship with her entourage and returned to her own vessel, where she would begin the week-long journey back to the harbor of Yin. If she had remembered correctly, she would around the time it took for her baby brother the Crown Prince to return from the northwest province with Governor Joon Kitara, Lord of Kushiro and three strangers that she had only heard a little about.

What she did know about them was that the three men were hightborn and hailed from Westeros, or the "land of the white devils" as people in the Golden Empire referred to it. She had only met a few white devils when they were introduced in court, but they were always traders or exiles from the Seven Kingdoms. What makes them any different than the rest in that regard?

But she also heard some interesting rumors about the white devils that accompanied her baby brother. The oldest was the third son of House Stark, which she read as one of the oldest living houses in Westeros and had apparently found enough favor with Lord Joon to obtain a temporary officer's commission. Wonder how that went?

The other was the heir to House Tarly in the region of Westeros called the Reach, a family that produced great warriors. She had heard that this Tarly heir was no warrior but had served the Kitara family well by helping collect taxes and run the province while Lord Joon was campaigning to rescue her brother. A white devil in charge of administration... that has to speak much about his abilities, especially since he's a foreigner.

The last one was the most interesting. This one went by the name of Daeron Targaryen, last male heir of the deposed House Targaryen, who were also the last family to bond with dragons after Valyria was destroyed. She had heard that this Prince Daeron, as many at court referring to him as, was an expert swordsman, an experienced killer, and had been trained by a blind man in the combat arts. But most curiously, this Daeron Targaryen had two creatures at his side, a large white wolf called a direwolf and the first dragon seen on this side of the Bone Mountains in centuries. Not surprising, given that the Valyrians could control dragons even though they had been extinct for over a hundred years.

Khiara wasn't going to ask too many questions on how this Daeron got a dragon and was more focused on how this dragon could fit into her plans at court. Nobody will ever think to go against me should I have a dragon at my side, and its rider could be a great asset against the creatures of the prime minister.

And on the topic of Valyrians, their women were known to be quite beautiful and their men possessed a handsomeness reserved only for the gods, with only the Lengii to rival them. This Daeron might be handsome, so I should have fun when I see him.

At the same time, she wasn't looking forward to returning to court. The Prime Minister only allied himself with her brother because he was married to his daughter, Su-young. Although she was beautiful, she knew that her loyalties were split between her husband and her birth family, meaning that she could not be trusted should the imperial family and the Prime Minister have open conflicts.

Not helping matters stemmed from their marriage itself. Although Khiara did see tenderness
between Sumeng and Su-young, she had seen how close her brother was to other men, especially the captain of the imperial guard. She lost count of how many times she had seen them enter the same quarters and not leave for the rest of the night. Great, so my brother loves the taste of men as much as he does with women.

But contrary to other people's expectations, she wasn't against that. In fact, have relationships within the same gender signified what station you belonged to, as the poor could never really enjoy relationships except those considered normal. And her brother was certainly not the first prince and emperor to enjoy the company of men.

Additionally, Khiara also had to be thankful for that fact, as Sumeng and Su-young still did not have any heirs due to his constant meetings with the captain of the imperial guard, Anlok Wu. One less headache to worry about, or the Prime Minister would never shut up if my baby brother had a son.

Besides his credentials, Admiral Okamoto would also become a key ally of hers, as the conflicts between the army and navy at court began to intensify especially after Sumeng's catastrophe. Okamoto held enough esteem in the fleet to make sure that the other admirals would not overstep themselves, but he was against the aggressors in the army, as they held contacts with various landed interests and with the Prime Minister's faction at court. If I want to survive, the navy has to remain strong, she thought.

The week passed by, where she and Admiral Okamoto came to an understanding before they entered the harbor of Yin.

Khiara looked upon the city that had served as capital of at least three dynasties before the azure one. She had mostly taken her surroundings for granted, so she contacted one of the city's newcomers, a merchant from the Slaver's Bay, and asked him to describe the city for her, where she would pay him one hundred silver taels.

The Slaver's Bay merchant described Yin as perfectly square, which each of its sides being six miles. It was enclosed with walls of earth, with the wall itself having twelve gates. The multitude of inhabitants, and the number of houses in the city, as also in the suburbs outside the city, of which there are twelve, corresponding to the twelve gates, was greater than the mind can comprehend. Or at least to those who had never lived in Yin before, she mused.

Within the walls of Yin stood the palace of the God-Emperor of the Golden Empire, the most extensive that had ever been known to man. The sides of the great halls were adorned with phoenixes in carved wood and gold, figures of warriors, of other birds and of beasts. On each of the sides of the palace were grand flights of marble steps. He was accurate.

On each start of the new year, there were great numbers of beautiful white horses that were presented to the emperor, along with elephants and lions, amounting to five thousand altogether, that were included in the procession. All of the beasts were covered with cloth that was richly worked with gold and silk. That was true.

The merchant also described the glazed roof tiles of the city, which alternated between red, green, blue, and yellow, as being as bright like crystal, meaning that they shone very far. He said that he could estimate the city's population, based on the number of prostitutes, of which there were at least twenty thousand and that fuel was so plentiful that everyone could take three hot baths a week. An exaggeration, as not anyone can just enter the bathhouses that constantly unless you had the coin and the connections.

Khiara commissioned the merchant one hundred more silver taels to put his description of Yin in
writing, accepting either High Valyrian or the common tongue, which she both knew thanks to her tutors. The work took more than a year, but she found herself immersed in his words of her home. It went as followed:

"As regards the size of Yin, everyone must know that it is laid out over an area of twenty-four miles, for each side of it has a length of sixty-one miles, and the city is laid out like a square. And it is all walled round with walls of earth, which have a thickness of full ten paces at bottom, and a height of more than ten paces. But they are not so thick at top, for they diminish in thickness as they rise, so that at top they are only about three paces thick. And they are provided throughout with loop-holed battlements, which are all whitened.

"There are twelve gates, and over each gate there is a great and handsome palace, so that there are on each side of the square three gates and five palaces, for there is at each angle also a great and handsome palace. In those palaces are vast halls in which are kept the arms of the city garrison.

"The streets are so straight and wide that you can see right along them from end to end and from one gate to the other. And up and down the city there are beautiful palaces, and many great and fine pubs, and fine houses in great numbers. All the plots of ground on which the houses of the city are built have square shapes and laid out with straight lines. All the plots are occupied by great and spacious palaces, with courts and gardens of proportionate size. All these plots were assigned to different heads of families. Each square plot is encompassed by handsome streets for traffic. Thus, the whole city is arranged in squares just like the board used by the cyvasse game and disposed in a manner so perfect and masterly that it is impossible to give a description that should do it justice.

"Moreover, in the middle of the city there is a great clock, a bell in other words, which is struck at night. And after it has struck three times no one must go out in the city, unless it be for the needs of a woman in labor, or of the sick. And those who go about on such errands are bound to carry lanterns with them. Moreover, the established guard at each gate of the city is fifty thousand armed men. It is a guard meant to help guard the emperor alongside his one thousand-strong imperial guard, and to prevent thieves from doing mischief in the town."

Khiara was very impressed and sent the merchant home a rich man.

Disembarking off of her vessel, with her entourage and Admiral Okamoto following her, she entered her litter and they moved through the bustling streets, with each of them being lined with bowing people when the leader of the Jade Order announced her presence. She was grateful, as she wanted to return to the palace as soon as possible to see what the newcomers were like and her trip through the capital was a quick one.

She then entered through the gates of the main imperial palace, with members of its massive household and large guard bowing to her as she passed by. Settling back in her pavilion, she moved up to the top level of her pagoda and gazed upon the sprawl that was Yin.

Suddenly, she heard a shriek. Turning to her left, she picked up a tiny form flying through the air and alarming many of the household and guards. As it drew closer, Khiara could make out its red and slender body, the latter explaining how it could fly so fast. From what she had read, she knew that this was the dragon everyone talked about.

But there was no way that she would be able to meet its rider on that day. Although it was too small still, it would only be a matter of time before it became a threat. And the introductions could be made tomorrow when the court would assemble on the morrow. Just you wait, dragonrider. Let's see what the next day brings.
Jon had been overwhelmed when he entered the city that Sumeng just couldn't stop talking about.

Sumeng described Yin, capital of the Golden Empire, as "the greatest city which may be found in this world." Situated on a great river that fed into the Jade Sea, Yin was a natural center for trade. Sumeng said that the capital had a population of over one million and five hundred thousand people, three times more than what King's Landing had, and had ten marketplaces. Each marketplace was half a mile long, where forty to fifty thousand people would go to shop on any given day, and four hundred bridges spread out over many waterways. There were also numerous eateries, a great quantity of rich palaces, and bathhouses with hot or cold baths, where a hundred men or a hundred women can bathe well and Sumeng openly boasted about being a sponsor to all of them. Public baths? Not comfortable showing my bare body to strangers.

Sumeng said to Jon, "When you have left the city of Asabhad and have travelled for a week through our splendid country, passing a number of other smaller cities, towns, and villages, you arrive at the most noble city of Yin, a name which is as much as to say in guanhua, 'the nave of the world.'" I like his enthusiasm, but he's talking too much.

"And since we are on the subject, I will enter into particulars about its magnificence, and these are well worth the telling, for the city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world," Sumeng didn't notice Jon's growing discomfort. "First and foremost, then, Yin is so great that it has a hundred miles of space. And there are in it four hundred bridges of stone, for the most part so lofty that a great fleet could pass beneath them. And let no man marvel that there are so many bridges, for you see the whole city stands as it were in the water and surrounded by water, so that a great many bridges are required to give free passage about it."

"I'm not looking forward to traveling by boat, if that is what he's implying.

"All the streets of the city are paved with stone or brick, as indeed are all the highways throughout Yin, so that you ride and travel in every direction without inconvenience. Were it not for this pavement you could not do so, for the country is very low and flat, and after rain, it can become deep in mire and water," added Sumeng. Cheerful.

"You must know also that the city of Yin has some three thousand baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world, large enough for one hundred people to bathe together. At the opposite side the city is shut in by a channel, perhaps forty miles in length, very wide, and full of water derived from the river, which was made by the ancient kings of the country in order to relieve the river when flooding its banks. This serves also as a defense to the city, and the earth dug from it has been thrown inwards, forming a kind of mound enclosing the city," Sumeng just didn't know when to stop.

But Jon prepared himself, for he knew that his introduction at court would not be easy no matter if Prince Sumeng decided to self-appoint himself as his sponsor. He's not a bad man, but his mind is too young for his body.

Eventually, the imperial entourage arrived back in the palace complex, which was certainly larger than Kushiro and had more than one palace inside.

"This is where we part ways for the day," Sumeng moved to his own palace. "Dress well for court and I shall also speak to my father on what rewards best fit you, your uncle's and your friend's merits. I'll see you tomorrow, Prince Daeron."
"Your Highness," Jon dipped his head to Sumeng as he, Benjen, and Sam were guided to a smaller palace, which was usually reserved for visiting royalty. *Oh, seven hells. I'll never hear the end of it now.*

Twice as large as Kushiro, the rooms were arranged in a similar manner, with screen doors, floor mats, and wooden floors. And compared to Lord Joon's preference for simplicity, it was richly decorated with golden phoenixes, many cheongja, and expensive-looking furniture among others. Jon also found a golden dragon similar to the one he met in that cave where Meleys was born.

Curious as to why the dragon was not the symbol of the empire, Jon learned that the dragon in the YiTish fashion represented the presence that ruled above the emperor and it would deeply offense to the gods for the emperor to adopt the dragon. As for the phoenix people wanted what it symbolized, peace and prosperity, to reign forever in the empire. *There can be no permanent peace and prosperity, not from what I had learned.*

But while he had Benjen and Sam with him, alongside Ghost and Meleys, Jon felt himself become aloof ever since Chanhee died. He continued to take his meals and feed both his direwolf and dragon, but it just became an unimportant process for him. Everything seemed to be cloudy and Jon couldn't take comfort in what used to bring him joy since he came to this land.

Although they appreciated Jon not pushing them away, Benjen and Sam were wise enough to give him his space, as he needed more time to move on from Chanhee's death, which was difficult for anyone trying to come to terms that the ones they loved weren't coming back. Even though the Goi people as a whole were punished for their involvement in Chanhee's death via an audit, which saw many of their privileges stripped, it was too little and too late for Jon.

What made things worse was how Sumeng reacted to Chanhee's death, despite her part in saving his life. It made what would happen in court taste all the more bitter in Jon's mouth, as he couldn't believe that the one who he rescued could be so callous because she was considered beneath him. *For the love of the old gods,* he groaned silently.

The next day came and Jon dressed in his best robes and strapped on the Yi-Tish armor supplied to him, which comprised of segmented parts that covered his chest, shoulders, and breastplate. Sumeng called him a warrior, so he had to dress like one. *Now he's telling how I can look? What more will he say?*

Benjen dressed in his army-issued uniform and armor while Sam dressed in white silk garments laced with gold. But more importantly, he was asked to bring Ghost and Meleys to court. Jon knew what was going on with that. *Just like when he entered the city, Sumeng wants to show me off, saying that I, who bonded with a direwolf and a dragon, rescued his life.*

But he had no time to complain, for he couldn't jeopardize his position at this stage.

Jon, Benjen, and Sam approached the largest palace in the complex. Two guards wearing the golden jacket opened the doors for them, bidding them to enter the massive chamber where at least a hundred courtiers stood straight and in perfect lines. They were all dressed impeccably, with their green robes signifying that they had passed their examinations and their ranks noted by their black hats and gems tied to their tops.

Above them all and seated upon a golden throne wide enough to seat five people, adorned with phoenixes of varying sizes, sat a large man dressed in the richest robes he had seen and with at least a hundred maids and manservants next to him. As for the man himself, he was slightly tan, plump, and had a balding head but his beard and remaining hair was still a solid black.
But those eyes caught Jon's attention. More than the eyes of Ned Stark and that of Lord Joon, this was a man who had many decades to learn how men plot amongst themselves and how to survive those who had sought to usurp him. While he seemed relaxed with his cup of tea in his right hand and a jar of burning incense on his left side, Jon had learned that looks could be deceiving and thus had to move carefully.

Sumeng was already by the emperor's side, sitting just below him. But unlike the previous day, he seemed rattled and for the first time unsure of himself. What in the hells happened with his father last night?

Right next to Sumeng was who Jon assumed was his full-blooded older sister, Khiara. Wearing in a silk gown lined with gold, her skirt that seemed only covered her long legs. Her tied-back hair showed appealing ears, jawline, neck, and cheeks, which was covered in a little powder.

Her face was the most attractive thing about her, as she had inherited her and Sumeng's mother's Lengii beauty via her pale white skin and thin eyeliner alongside her other ornaments. Now that Jon took a closer look at Sumeng, he was quite pleasant to look at, but he only had feelings for the opposite sex.

But what caught Jon's attention was her eyes. Just like her father's, it gave off a certain wisdom that would have taken years to develop, but she couldn't be that much older than himself. Unlike her little brother, she had used her time at court well. It didn't help that she was staring right into his eyes and he felt as if knives were digging into his head. Don't look at her too much.

There were two other men who saw just below Sumeng and Khiara but occupied the bottom layer of the phoenix throne. From what Sumeng described of his two half-brothers, Prince Yujin and Prince Kaijin, Jon was able to recognize them instantly.

Yujin was the tallest of the brothers and very lean and muscular, just like himself, but he was reportedly a deadly fighter, trained by an assassin called a shinobi. He was also ruthless and a short temper, as Sumeng said that he once killed a maid because he didn't like the way his meal smelled. He also had a scar that ran down his left eye, adding to the somewhat wild gaze in his eyes. Better watch out for that one.

As for Kaijin, he was also muscular and a trained warrior, but received his instruction from warrior monks, those who had a different temperament to assassins and always emphasized restraint. Sumeng said nothing but good things about him, as he was kind and quite serious when it came to his obligations.

But as both Kaijin and Yujin were sons of concubines, they could not inherit the throne unless the emperor gave a special decree and the court backed it. But considering that Sumeng was married to the Prime Minister's daughter, that was unlikely to happen.

Jon also remembered from Sumeng's words that the Prime Minister was the closest to the phoenix throne besides those carrying the emperor's blood. Looking to his left, he was clean-shaven, neither taller or shorter than Jon himself, and had tan skin. But like the emperor, his eyes betrayed possibly decades of experience and if what Sumeng said was true, he had to be mindful of him.

Things are different now. I have to learn, or we all die, Jon thought.

Lord Joon had also joined them, as he represented the empire's northern provinces on that day.

"Fall prostrate on the ground," Lord Joon commanded the three. Benjen and Sam complied, but the emperor put his hand up when Jon was about to.
"You're a prince, Daeron Targaryen, and of dragon's blood," the emperor spoke in that court dialect of guanhua. "You only need to bow while standing."

"Thank you, Your Augustness," Jon did so.

"Quite an auspicious day," the emperor started. "Not only do we have three white devils in our court, we have the last male heir of the last dragonlord family in the world. Tell me, Prince Daeron. Do you seek the Iron Throne of Westeros?"

Jon knew that he had to answer his question carefully, for the wrong answer might put him in trouble on the first day at court. "It is a desire of any family to see their birthright to be restored to them, Your Augustness. But I will find the task difficult due to the actions of my predecessors."

The emperor nodded in satisfaction. "Indeed. Although inconsequential, the actions of your Mad King are well known in this part of the world. And I hear that you are related to this boy king, Robb Stark. It seems as if both sides of your family wore crowns before losing them."

Jon gulped, trying hard to not respond unwisely to his insult. "My only concern is the safety of my family, Your Augustness, one of whom is standing beside me right now. If a crown helps me in that regard, then I shall take it."

The emperor chuckled, amused. "I admire your honesty, Prince Daeron, but be mindful in that some of the most terrible acts ever committed by man was because of family affairs. I hope that your family interests don't conflict with my own."

"I shall endeavor to avoid that from happening, Your Augustness," Jon kept up his outer deference while not letting the emperor's words get to him.

"Now, let's get this on," the emperor gestured to his herald, who picked up the first of four scrolls and unrolled them.

"In an effort to suppress the renegade jhats of the Jogos Nhai, Crown Prince Sumeng was given command of an army of one hundred thousand troops, all of whom fell in battle while the Crown Prince was captured. But in the course of his rescue, Joon Kitara, Lord of Kushiro, and Brigade Captain Benjen Stark distinguished themselves on the field of battle and helped turn the tide against the enemy," the herald read aloud. "Most importantly, Daeron Targaryen disregarded his own safety and personally rescued the heir to the phoenix throne, thus ensuring the safety of the Golden Empire. The three have distinguished themselves with great honor and merit and such actions deserve fair reparation."

Jon was confused as to why they didn't mention Sam, even though he didn't fight, but he was angry at them not mentioning Chanhee. However, he kept his mouth shut.

"Joon Kitara, you have proven yourself an able commander and governor, and have done well in retaining the emperor's favor," the herald opened the next scroll, a blue one. "For this, the emperor has decided to promote you to the rank of field marshal. You shall also be appointed as the emperor's master of the horse and be granted an annual income of forty thousand silver taels for the next twenty-five years."

Joon lowered his forehead onto the ground. "You honor me very much, Your Augustness."

"Benjen Stark, son of Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell," the herald moved onto the next scroll, a gray one. "For actions in the field, the emperor is pleased to make your temporary officer's commission as a brigade captain into a permanent one, so you now enjoy the privileges that come
with imperial service. He has also decided to promote you to the rank of lieutenant-general and appoint you commander of the field army at Si Qo. You will also be appointed as a vice-minister of war, so your voice will be heard in all matters of security to the empire, and you shall enjoy an annual income of five thousand silver taels for the next ten years alongside your salaries."

Benjen obviously didn't expect such praise and was bad at hiding it, but he copied Lord Joon and lowered his forehead to the ground. "Thank you, Your Augustness."

The herald held up a green scroll. "Samwell Tarly, you have demonstrated exceptional skill in administrating a province alongside the heir to Kushiro. Such talents, for a foreigner, only shows how exceptional you are. Therefore, the emperor has decided to appoint you to the imperial household, as assistant to the Minister Steward. You shall attend to the imperial family to the best of your abilities and ensure that all those carrying the emperor's blood is prepared for the responsibilities that will be expected of them."

Sam did the same action as Joon and Benjen. "Thank you, Your Augustness."

Finally, the herald picked the last scroll, appropriately a red one lined with black. "Daeron Targaryen, as one of royal descent and for your actions in safeguarding the empire, it is the emperor's pleasure to elevate as a prince of the empire. You will be granted your family's traditional title as 'Prince of Dragonstone' and be treated as all princes in this empire should. You will be granted a palace within the emperor's dwelling, a bodyguard and personal household, and incomes derived from land and customs amounting to two hundred and fifty thousand silver taels for the maintenance of your dignity."

*Just like Sumeng said, Jon thought nonchalantly.*

"In addition, as per the recommendations of the Crown Prince, you shall be made Lieutenant of the Imperial Guard, where you will serve alongside Captain Chenyin Gao. But you shall be also appointed as assistant quartermaster of the capital garrison, where your voice will be heard in all decisions of the defense of Yin."

Jon glanced around quickly at the officials in the court. Some were neutral or pleased with how the ceremony went, but many seemed discontent at how it all went. They had prepared for years to pass the examinations their way up the court, but here were three white devils who accomplished within a few weeks what took them their entire youths. And he sensed that no matter what he did, they would not like him at the very least. *The old gods help me.*

"On a more personal note, Prince Daeron," the emperor said after his herald was finished. "I would like to see your creatures in action, especially your dragon. Feed it well and don't make us wait too long in riding it."

Jon rubbed both Ghost's and Meleys' heads, who purred contentedly but also sensed his worries, as both were already being drawn into the plotting of the court.

"What are their names?" Khiara asked.

"The direwolf is named Ghost, since he rarely makes a sound, Your Highness," Jon introduced him. Khiara laughed softly in delight, with the court following.

"And the dragon?"

"She is called Meleys, Your Highness," Jon answered.

"Like the Red Queen," Khiara noted.
"Very good, Your Highness," Jon was impressed.

"After you all report for duty, I invite you four to join me for dinner," the emperor offered. "It's not often that white foreigners come this far, so I do not wish to waste the chance that the gods gave me."

"We'll be honored, Your Augustness," Joon answered.

The emperor bid them all to stand back up, but they averted their gaze. "Today might be a great day for you all, but I expect you to perform as required of your new positions. In any case, my congratulations to Lord Joon Kitara, Benjen Stark, Samwell Tarly, and Prince Daeron Targaryen. For our three guests, I bid you welcome to the empire."

The herald stood straight to the court as he threw his hands up in the air. "Wú huángdi, wàn-suì!" It was essentially "tennōheika banzai" but in guanhua. The entire cheered three times, with Joon, Benjen, Sam, and Jon also doing the same, but the three were noticeably hesitant since this was their first time actually doing it in front of the emperor.

But as Jon continued to take in the praises that were being shouted, he thought on his family. Robb, Arya, Bran, Rickon, and Sansa, hoping that they were doing as best as they could in staying safe.

As for his aunt Daenerys, Jon could only pray that wherever she was, she wasn't feeling what he was feeling now. Be strong, Aunt Daenerys.

Chapter End Notes

Here are the casting ideas for the new characters of the court arc: Gemma Chan (Khiara), Benedict Wong (the emperor), Ki Hong Lee (Prince Sumeng), Lee Byung-hun (Prince Yujin), Iko Uwais (Prince Kaijin), Chenyin Dao (Chris Pang), Chin Han (Prime Minister Hudam Shu), Sonoya Mizuno (Su-young, Sumeng's wife), and Tzi Ma (one of the Prime Minister's key allies and the Minister of the Economy) among others. Just for visualization.

And I hope these were good introductions to the next important characters of the Yi-Ti arc. For all those wanting the arc to be done, I understand, but Jon needs more time to build up the reputation and resources needed to return to Westeros with an army and fleet and thus be of any use to his Stark family and to Daenerys (who we'll also return to soon).

Importantly, Jon's, Benjen's, and Sam's new positions will put them in a place where they could really learn how to survive the game of thrones on their own, in which we see the key players in Yi-Ti. The army vs navy conflicts were inspired by the inter-service rivalry of the Japanese Empire before and during World War II, and look up Wu Zetian (the historical model for Khiara), the only woman that I know of who successfully ruled as Empress of China during the Tang Dynasty. Watch out for Khiara, as nothing good can come from her gaze onto Jon.

Hope this was a good start to the next step. And don't worry. We will see familiar characters later on in this story, and how they have fared while Jon was in the east.
Hope you all are staying safe. And as I said before, I might run into some delays with the writing due to other things going in my life. But I will try to be consistent with the writing.

Daenerys walked through the deep, dark halls of the House of the Undying, her priority being the recovery of her children. She could feel their distress, their need of their mother, and she had to move quickly if she wanted to be reunited with them after the warlocks under Pyat Pree kidnapped them.

Jorah and her bloodriders wanted to follow closely behind, but lost track of her as she ventured further in. But even as the torch began to flicker, she started to feel cold and realized that something was off about this place.

Finding herself faced with a door, Daenerys opened it and went inside. But instead of continuing down a hallway, she found herself midair. Letting go of her torch, she felt herself falling and screamed before a black shape flew underneath and caught her just in time.

Getting her bearings, Daenerys grabbed onto the spines as best as she could and sensed something familiar about the shape she was holding onto. Realizing that it was a dragon, it stared back at her and roared to her *Don’t worry, hang on.*

* Drogon? Daenerys felt immense pride at how her biggest child had grown and allowed her son to guide her through.

Soon, she heard three more shrieks. Looking around, she saw the fully-grown forms of Rhaegal, Viserion, and the red dragon flown by Daeron, the comely young man that she had met through her visions. All circled each other, roaring playfully as they enjoyed the freedom that came with flying through the air.

But soon, Daenerys heard a groaning sound. Looking down to her left, she saw another winged shape fly towards them. *That’s not a dragon,* she thought as she sensed something off about that creature.

Rhaegal, Viserion, and the red dragon also noticed the newcomer and bellowed in hostility towards the winged creature that tried to pass as one of them. And before the winged creature, which Daenerys recognized as a wyrm from what Viserys had described, could close the distance with Drogon, Viserion and the red dragon pounced on it and immediately caused severe burns while tearing it to shreds.

Shocked at how quickly and unexpected the sight was, Daenerys looked back up and saw that Drogon was entering a thick cloud. Closing her eyes, she then felt the spines disappear and herself walking on solid ground once again. The mistiness that surrounded her also dissipated, to reveal a tent that was similar to the one she shared with Drogo.

Daenerys felt herself enter this tent, but instantly knew something was wrong. Looking around, she
then saw Daeron holding who appeared to be a Yi-Tish woman in his arms and crying profusely over her dead body. It reminded her of how much pain she felt when Drogo died, and she knelt down to pat his shoulder.

Daeron felt her presence, looking up and then turning to see the other Targaryen in the world.

“Hello, Daeron,” Daenerys tried to answer as softly as she could, given the situation he was in.

“Hi, Daenerys,” Jon smiled sadly at her.

“I must have come at a bad time,” Daenerys tried to jest.

Daeron sniffled. “I guess you have.”

Daenerys looked at the dead Yi-Tish woman’s body. She’s pretty. “Who was she?”

“My first love, and the one that I had failed to protect,” Daeron managed while almost tearing up again.

Daenerys felt her heart clench, as those were the same feelings she had when she tried to bring life back to Drogo. “I’m so sorry, Daeron.”

Daeron closed his eyes. “I got vengeance on those that killed her, but I know now that it won’t bring her back. It should have been me that they took.”

Daenerys grabbed his cheeks and forced him to look at her. “No, no. You are the blood of the dragon, as you have proved. I’ve lost too much family already and I will not lose more.”

“What good is having a dragon when you couldn’t save the one you loved?” Jon shot back bitterly.

Daenerys, to his surprise, bobbed her head. “I understand how you feel, Daeron. And you want the whole world to burn while you don’t give a damn about the consequences. Believe me. I know that feeling. But it’s those feelings that made me jump into the pyre, and that’s how my children were born. Whatever force that proved cruel to me apparently blessed me and I believe that you are part of it.”

Daeron raised an eyebrow.

“Besides my dragons, your existence brought new life to me. I am not alone anymore, and that’s all I need to know for me to step forward without losing hope. And I don’t want to lose my family again,” Daenerys grabbed his hand and kissed it, feeling the warmth in his palm.

Daeron’s eyes softened, torn between being happy at Daenerys being there for him and being mournful for his first love.

Daenerys placed her hand on the woman’s forehead. “What was her name?”

“Chanhee,” Daeron managed.

Daenerys closed her eyes, as if she was speaking to Chanhee’s spirit through her touch. “Chanhee, a beautiful name. Thank you for taking care of Daeron and for showing him what love can be. I will remember your name and what you did for my family.”

Daeron smiled in gratitude. “Thank you, Daenerys.”

“I look forward to finally meeting you,” Daenerys said with hope.
“Likewise.”

But before they could continue talking, Daenerys felt herself be pulled away from her vision with Daeron, but managed to say, “Be sure to stay alive!”

“You too!” he called out.

As the vision ended, Daenerys found herself chained by the wrists and facing Pyat Pree. Behind her were her children, also chained.

But no longer afraid of the dangers in Qarth and what others may await her, Daenerys tightened her fist and smirked at the warlock. “Chains do not fit a dragon and I shall be free,” she said with renewed confidence.

“I wouldn’t worry myself with delusions, mother of dragons,” Pyat Pree tried to dissuade her.

“Not delusions,” Daenerys answered before letting her dragons loose on the warlocks.

Joon had forgotten how uncomfortable he really was when he attended court many years ago. He expected nothing to have changed, since the very bureaucracy that had allowed the types of people coming from mean backgrounds to become officials would continue to allow such men to dominate court affairs. But to see such men not only remain, but their scheming to become worse than what he was accustomed to was… I really want to go home.

Not that he looked down on those of humble origins. In fact, he had been in gatherings where only those of noble blood were allowed and he thought that those occasions attracted the most boring and uninspiring sorts that he had ever seen. The only reason why my family was able to keep our lands and titles was because we remained vigilant against those that would try to take both from us, something that those fools have forgotten.

That’s why he enjoyed being in the army, because there was a higher probability of being surrounded from those that came from many walks of life. Farmers, merchants, craftsmen, and nobles had to rub shoulders with each other if they wanted to stay alive in battle, although the cavalry was almost always led by those with titles and Joon was no exception. More importantly, a diverse composition led to a wider range of solutions offered, as nobles could only think in a certain way and the same applied to the commoners and those of other mean origins. They can think one way, the others can think more ways, and a combination of both can lead to interesting proposals.

But very often, the examination system allowed those who were not exactly morally scrupulous to enter positions of authority as long as they passed and pleased their higher-ups. What was especially worrisome for Joon was that sons of merchants were being allowed to enter imperial service, either in the army, fleet, or as an official. From his experiences, merchants were the worst types out there, as their bottom position in society combined with their financial resources led to a deep desire to move up with whatever means were available to them. Such was the case of his Adjutant Dae, whose family purchased noble status after doing a favor for the Prime Minister, Hudam Shu. And Adjutant Dae exhibited a tiresome sense of superiority, since he could live like a noble and spend lavishly on himself for all to see. His family’s massive coin possessions and new titles make me fear on what lies in the future for the nobility.

Compared to when he was last in court, Joon could see how much influence was spread because of money, as the number of the officials coming from mercantile slime had increased. While bribery was still a problem, he was shocked to discover that he had to pay more for the privilege. He
thought that the past monthly rate of three hundred silver taels to the previous Minister of the Economy was ridiculous, but the current Minister, Duan Min, required one thousand and two hundred to be paid before they could make proposals before the court.

As the emperor’s master of the horse, essentially making him commander over all of the imperial cavalry, Joon had to say his piece in court if he wanted to perform his duties sufficiently. And since the Minister Min held control over the imperial purse, he could make things very difficult for Joon if he was offended. *Good thing the emperor gave me an additional forty thousand, or I will have too much to worry about.*

On the bright side, many of the officials that Joon made adversaries in had either long retired or were assigned elsewhere in the empire. He also heard that Princess Khiara was developing relationships with the admirals in the fleet, who were much more agreeable to Joon than the army generals in the south since they knew how to wisely use resources and the sea made them strong in the mind. In contrast, the southern generals were too often lured by wealth and thus very susceptible to the more unscrupulous types at court, making them very dangerous since the southern armies outnumbered those in the northern provinces.

Joon was able to have words with Yingjie Okamoto, now the First High Admiral of the Fleet, as they enjoyed their dinner.

“*The last time that I had seen you, Admiral, you were a mere captain and the spare to Lord Kenji Okamoto,*” Joon drunk his arakju.

“*The last time that I had seen you, Field Marshal, you were a man marked for death,*” Okamoto answered. Joon laughed at how much truth there was in that statement. “You made many enemies that day, with your support of the fleet. But for that, I must thank you. We were able to mount new cannons and refurbish our ships with the money that the emperor gave us.”

“The fleet is important to the security of the empire, Admiral, because we must protect our seas. Just like the northern armies protect the empire from the barbarians that live in the plains,” Joon put a piece of sashimi in his mouth.

“True,” Okamoto sipped his soup. “ Especially given that the southern armies failed colossally in achieving their objectives before they sent you to clean their mess up.”

Joon groaned. “Why couldn’t they have just left it alone? We already had peaceful relations with the Jogos Nhai and we could have taken care the jhat Detu without their interference.”

“That’s also true, but then again, they needed some way to justify their massive expense accounts. You can’t have a large army that doesn’t fight.”

“But one hundred thousand men lost? Either the Crown Prince made poor choices of commanders, or he wasn’t educated properly in the art of war, but both do not explain such massive amounts of losses in terms of men and equipment,” Joon revealed his thoughts on the matter.

“I concur. But… I’d say this is an opportunity,” Admiral Okamoto drank his arakju.

Joon became curious. “For what?”

“Even though most of your past adversaries are not in court at the moment, my lord, your affiliation and sheltering of those white devils certainly did not do you any favors with the officials, especially those aligned with the Prime Minister.”

“I saw that,” Joon admitted. “They only see them as upstarts, even though Prince Daeron has a
dragon.”

“Exactly. You insulted them by showing that one didn’t need to spend years studying and putting in hard effort to rise up in power. When you come right down to it, you showed them that there were other ways to progress and that alone offends their traditionalist way of thinking.”

“How is this connected to what you said about an opportunity?” Joon had some idea, but he wanted for Okamoto to say it out loud.

“Prince Sumeng will have to answer for this, as even the smallfolk will not tolerate the losses that he’s responsible for. And given his connection to the Su-young Shu…”

*Oh, now I see*, Joon thought. “You see to damage the Prime Minister in some way by attacking Prince Sumeng.”

Okamoto nodded. “I’m not alone in thinking that. Her Highness the Princess Khiara wants to hurt the Prime Minister in any way she could, since we both agree that the Shu family are becoming too threatening. They need to be checked before they become too powerful to deal with.”

Joon sighed. “I’m correct in believing that the Princess can call on support from the fleet?”

“The Prime Minister has the southern army commanders in his pocket, alongside the more financially-inclined interests in the southern provinces. The only way to balance them out is through the fleet, where we and Her Highness have common interests.”

*Gods help me.* “And where do I fit in all of this?”

“You have supported the fleet before, and we benefitted greatly because of you. And our potential partners in the northern provinces cannot be alienated from court, lest we invite divisions in our empire. Perhaps you can join us.”

Joon calmly set down his cup of spirits. “I have a family to provide for, a son and two daughters. And the only reason why I’m still alive after that incident in court years ago was because the emperor appointed me the Governor of the Northwest Province. And I am not going to jeopardize my family by being involved in whatever schemes you have concocted.”

“Careful,” Okamoto warned him. “Those schemes have the Princess’ endorsement. By rejecting me, you are rejecting her. Besides, I don’t think you have a choice, because of your support of those white devils and what duties you have now.”

“I don’t know much about this Hudam Shu, but I can tell from what I had seen at court that he’s not a man to be trifled with. And should Prince Sumeng and Princess Su-young have heirs and we move against them, not only will our lives become forfeit, our families will suffer the consequences,” Joon allowed his worries to be in the open.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Okamoto shook his head. “Regarding the heirs.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say that the heir to the phoenix throne partakes in certain pleasures that threaten the succession,” Okamoto said cryptically.

But Joon’s eyes widened, completely understanding his meaning. “You mean…”

“With Chenyin Dao, Captain of the Imperial Guard,” Okamoto confirmed.
“How do I know that’s true?”

“Sumeng has been married to Su-young for two years and they still haven’t produced an heir. And certain people of confidence in the household have seen their liaisons.”

“Be careful of what you say, Lord Yingjie. That is slander and treason.”

“Come now, Lord Joon. I’m sure you have seen how unfit he is for governance and how much arrogance he possesses,” Okamoto was not buying Joon’s warning of treason, which was already weak given his tone. “Should the throne pass to him, a man who buggers other men and thus imperils the imperial family with his accolades, our empire shall be threatened from within.”

Prince Sumeng was not the first one of the emperor’s blood to have intimate relationships with men, but such bonds were tolerated only after they had children, especially sons. But there was something more that Joon could sense. “You’re afraid that if Prince Sumeng either inherits the throne or doesn’t sire a prince, his half-brothers might pursue the throne themselves.”

“It’s Prince Yujin I’m worried about,” Okamoto was genuinely frightened at that prospect. “The only thing that man is good for is holding a grudge. He’s ten years older than Prince Sumeng, but everyone knows how much he resents having to submit to his younger brother. Plus, he doesn’t know restraint, largely because of his assassin teacher. I don’t know what caused the emperor to hire a shinobi to teach his son.”

Joon had heard the stories of Yujin’s outbursts and lack of self-control. Although deadly with a sword, he was the worst type of fighter in that defeating the enemy would not be enough for him.

“So as of now, it’s either giving the throne to Hudam Shu or letting Prince Yujin step in. But both would spell disaster. Therefore, we must control the Prime Minister while also making sure that the throne is outside of Yujin’s grasp,” Okamoto continued.

“All right. Say I do want to side with you. What is the first thing that I should do? All I hear are your reasons that I should side with you, but I don’t know what I can do,” Joon was gauging how he would respond to that.

“I heard that the emperor will conduct an investigation of the Crown Prince’s misconduct. When the time comes, advocate a punishment that will negatively affect Prince Sumeng’s reputation, but not to the point where the emperor will consider replacing him by decree. He does value his family, so he could force it through if pushed, and that’s another outcome we want to avoid.”

Joon thought on Okamoto’s words as he sat in court, with all present awaiting the emperor’s entrance. But unlike most sessions, this was probably the first time that they saw the Crown Prince on his knees before the phoenix throne, a sign of what was to come. A prince on his knees and dressed in white robes meant that he had to pay penance for an extraordinary crime. And since this was a session only meant for the Crown Prince, Princess Khiara, Prince Yujin, Prince Kaijin, and Daeron were not present.

“His Augustness the Emperor!” the herald called out, with all of the officials including Joon standing up and bowing as he entered court and sat on the phoenix throne.

“As you were,” the emperor sat straightly on his throne. “This court has been assembled to begin investigations on the conduct of my son, Crown Prince Sumeng. There has been no catastrophe greater than the loss of not one, but two armies entrusted to his care and command. Such actions put doubt on his ability to rule as the next emperor of the azure line. If such doubts persist, our empire will be imperiled.”
The Prime Minister, Minister Min, and the other members of his faction were stoic in the face of the emperor’s tranquil fury, but some other officials nodded in agreement.

“Your Augustness, I feel compelled—” Sumeng tried to speak, only to be silenced by the emperor’s Grand Secretary.

“Hush, Your Highness! You are before the Emperor’s Augustness,” the secretary hissed, earning Sumeng’s glare.

“While the investigation shall take place, the stain of guilt upon my son’s honor is undeniable,” the emperor then eyed towards the entire court. “All of you. What is a fitting punishment for my son in light of his failures as a commander of troops?”

“Send him into a monastery, Your Augustness,” one of the officials recommended. “A few years amongst the austerity of the monks should teach him much on humility and contrition.”

“A prince in a monastery? You surely jest,” another official scoffed. “If there is anyone to blame, it is the commanders under him and not His Highness himself.”

“The emperor said that his guilt is undeniable,” another official called out. “I say remove him from the succession.”

“Treason!” a member of Prime Minister Shu’s faction shouted. “Hold your tongue against those of the emperor’s blood!”

“Or what? We all know that you are the Prime Minister’s creature and you will do anything to see his blood on the throne!” another accused.

“My only concern is for the safety of the empire, but removing Prince Sumeng jeopardizes that,” the Prime Minister defended.

“Bah! You have designs on the throne, and we all know it!”

At once, the Prime Minister’s faction erupted in defense of their leader as pandemonium broke out in the court. The emperor remained silent, observing the bickering amongst his officials with indifference. It was not the first time that he had seen such things happen and in fact, it happened so often that he no longer frustration at it.

Deciding to take matters into his own hands, and seeing that the arguments were going nowhere, he called over an attendant and whispered in his ear, “Have the herald call out my name,” before slipping him a single silver tael. The attendant complied and ran over to him, who nodded while staring at Lord Joon.

“SIIIIIIIILEEEEEEEENCE!” the herald mustered his loudest voice. Gradually, the court quieted down. “Field Marshal Kitara has something to say.”

The Prime Minister, his faction, and the other officials turned their attention on the Lord of Kushiro.

“If it pleases Your Augustness, I have a recommendation that can accomplish justice while maintaining His Highness’ dignity.”

“You may, my lord,” the emperor allowed him.

“Unlike the rest of you, I led the efforts to have His Highness freed. Only with the intervention of
myself and Prince Daeron and his Chogo companion was he able to be liberated.” Many of the officials were displeased that a steppes woman was involved, which Joon shrugged off. “And I helped bury the bodies of the men slain under Prince Sumeng’s command, of which there were too many and thus I had to pay citizens to help me. The prince must know the consequences of his mistakes.”

Some of the same officials who nodded at the necessity of Prince Sumeng punished bobbed their heads in assent, while others continued to listen.

“At the same time, he is still a young man and thus has time to learn from his mistakes, however serious they may be,” Joon eyed Sumeng, who became confused. “I suggest that he pay penance by visiting the villages and provinces where the troops who died were born and apologize to each of the families for losing their sons. Having to deal with the families that he directly affected should teach him a lesson in humility, while his willingness to condescend himself for the lives lost might also repair the damage done to his reputation.”

The emperor rubbed his chin in thought, while the court remained silent. But at the same time, there were murmurings amongst the officials, many of whom became attracted to Joon’s solution.

“I like it, Lord Joon,” Admiral Okamoto stepped forward. “Apologizing to each of the families who suffered a loss will allow our prince a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of the population while teaching him that his actions have consequences, which will affect the stability of our empire.”

“Agreed,” the Minister of War stepped forward. “Some of the families might also forgive him and thus creating stronger base of support for Prince Sumeng.”

“Why should the Crown Prince apologize? The families can mate like rabbits and thus replace our losses soon enough,” an official callously answered.

“With that attitude, we won’t have troops left to call on eventually,” Joon shot back.

“And that is what he will do,” the emperor projected his voice. “My son shall depart the capital and visit the southwestern and southeastern provinces, where the troops who were killed hailed from, and he shall hold sessions in the major villages, Jinqi, and Asabhad to apologize to the families who had lost their son. Let’s hope that this trip will be valuable to my son’s development, for he has a long way to go still.”

Prince Sumeng shook before placing his forehead on the floor. “I shall follow your commands, Your Augustness.”

“I am glad that we were able to quickly find a solution,” the emperor ignored his son before leaving the court, with the officials bowing as he exited.

Joon twiddled with his thumbs as he passed by the many officials, some who commended him while others kept their distance. As for Admiral Okamoto, he gave an approving look to Joon, satisfied with what he did. May the gods protect me, for every action I take will get me enemies that want to kill me.

Jon rode on his horse, with Ghost plodding besides him and Meleys flying above, as he traveled next to Prince Sumeng. They had just entered the southeastern province, very close to the Shadowlands of Asshai, and would soon reach their first destination in Jinqi, where Sumeng would hold his first session to apologize to the families.
While Jon was not going to complain about traveling to another place, the circumstances tempered his excitement considerably for the trip. He was not looking forward to seeing Sumeng apologize to the families that he had affected, both because the pain from the families would be hard to look at and since Sumeng didn’t even know how to make a sincere apology to those he considered beneath him. He would have to endure many moments of insincerity from the prince’s part, which Jon didn’t want.

At the same time, he did hear that the meat dishes in Jinqi were the best in the empire, as the eastern provinces had developed ways to cook meat without adding much flavors or other sauces. Some of the dishes included pork belly and beef ribs, those made by the smallfolk since those parts were the only ones that those more well-off would not touch but became popular. Sam would have liked it, but the Minister Steward assigned him to Prince Kaijin and thus couldn’t come. At least he’s with the one good prince from what I hear of Kaijin.

After about two weeks of traveling, they finally made it to Jinqi, former capital of the kingdom of the goryeo people but still their cultural center. The city was built up on over twenty square miles of space, with a radius of approximately six miles, roughly bisected into eastern and western halves of the river delta. That river was the source of major conflict in the pre-Golden Empire times, as the river was a route used by those traveling between the Mountains of the Morn and Leng.

The city was still bound the walls that had been originally erected, which were defined by the four mountains that connected them. The city was bordered by eight mountains in total, as well as the more level lands of the river delta plain and southeastern areas. Due to its geography and recent times, Jinqi was a very polycentric city. It also had the largest number of Shadowmen outside of Asshai, with their quarter right on the edge of the river delta.

“How do you like your rank, Lieutenant?” Prince Sumeng asked as they entered the city.

“The golden jacket is making the heat worse,” Jon wiped the sweat from his brow, as the wetness of the south became very uncomfortable to him.

“We shan’t be long, Prince Daeron,” Sumeng assured him. “We’ll travel to some villages in this province before moving by ship to Asabhad. After that, we can return to the palace.”

Sumeng clearly didn’t enjoy what he had to do, but he felt comforted that someone he knew was with him. At the same time, Jon was not relishing his new position despite the prestige it came with.

He also wasn’t used to having his own guards and servants wait on him, for he had none at Winterfell. As he was a prince, he was entitled to an entourage of forty men and sixty servants, compared to the Crown Prince’s own of two hundred men and two hundred servants. However, the massive differences no longer overwhelmed Jon, as the last week spent at the palace dulled the parts of his mind that still wouldn’t have gotten used to the opulence that he had witnessed.

As that would bother me now. Jon had more important worries on his mind, all of them stemming from his new station in the empire. Although not recognizing it at the time, he started to realize the importance of the emperor elevating him as “Prince of Dragonstone,” as the he was recognizing Jon’s claim to the Iron Throne while not offering material support yet. More than rewarding him for rescuing Sumeng, having a potential claimant to the Iron Throne had its value should the emperor find reason to back him in the future. I can’t stay here long. The sooner he recognizes my claim, the sooner I can get the men and support I need and return to face the threat from beyond the Wall.

Whether the emperor even knew of the existence of his aunt Daenerys and her own claim to the
Iron Throne was unknown, but the uncertainty of it all made Jon all the more anxious. *I should think that my own existence would not be a secret forever, as someone might inform the stags that there is not one but two Targaryens gathering their strength.* And he really did hope that his aunt was working on obtaining those that would support her as he was.

Going back on his present situation, Jon began to become more familiar with his new duties. The Imperial Guard comprised of the best soldiers the empire had, and appointments were usually for life. But unlike the kingsguard, each member retained considerable freedom in that they could marry and start families. More importantly, there were important differences between the soldiers and officers, with the latter having the ability to resign and that officer positions could also be honorary. It thus surprised Jon that Lord Joon was listed as “Honorary Lieutenant of the Imperial Guard,” thus explaining why he could wear the golden jacket. But due to the prestige of the Imperial Guard and how few men had the privilege of wearing the golden jacket, officers rarely resigned and were only removed if they did something heinous.

But Jon’s duties were not honorary, and he had to cooperate with Chenyin Dao, since he technically outranked him despite being a prince. What was more surprising was that as Captain of the Imperial Guard, Dao was equal in rank to the Supreme Marshal of the Army and the High First Admiral, so Jon himself also outranked the majority of the empire’s officers. *Lord Joon probably will not take that well.*

Besides his duties with the Imperial Guard, which included conversing with other military officers and dealing with the security affairs of the imperial household, Jon also had to fulfill his obligations as assistant quartermaster to the commander of the Yin garrison. Remembering what Quartermaster Shin did for Lord Joon, Jon had to sift through several pieces of paper that concerned with supply issues to the capital garrison troops and more importantly, intelligence. This was probably the first time that he had even interacted with secret affairs, which would have become too much for Jon to handle had it not been for the garrison’s head quartermaster, the one he had to answer to.

A professional just like Lord Joon and Quartermaster Shin, Quartermaster Choi was kind enough to take Jon under his wing and teach him the basics of his new position. But he told him outright, “After a point, you’re on your own. I can’t interfere with how a prince is educated, especially in a position as important as yours.”

Although a lieutenant in the imperial guard, Jon was also a prince and therefore not bound to be at Sumeng’s side when he held his sessions. So, he decided to explore Jinqi and get a taste of its food. Walking through the streets, he was struck by how similar and different Jinqi was in compared to Yin. Unlike in Yin, signs were posted in both guanhua and in goryeomal, signifying how both cultures coexisted. But like Yin and Asahbad, life was vibrant and the sounds and smells that defined any major city were present. He also saw more soup pots being boiled in the open, which showed that soup dishes were among Jinqi’s other specialties.

Jon eventually caught his eye on a shop, with a sign that read “Song’s Cow Rest” in goryeomal. *Not exactly an exiting title.* Entering with Ghost and Meleys, who flew down and clawed after him, he entered the shop and scared many of the patrons with his creatures.

“Hey, you!” one of the cooks emerged from the kitchen. “You can’t bring your animals here! Take them outside!”

Jon had to be impressed that the cook ignored Meleys. “I don’t want any trouble. I just want something to eat,” he spoke in goryeomal.
“Well, I don’t serve white devils. Go on with you!” the cook tried to push him out, only for Ghost and Meleys to bare their teeth. To his credit, the cook was more concerned for his customers and thus paid them no attention. Interesting.

“Song,” a man stood up from his table. Jon was struck by how his body was covered in tattoos and more importantly, his face covered by a red lacquered wooden mask. “He’s clearly new here and said that he wants something to eat. Is this how you run your business?”

“You’ve been here for years, Ardroon. I never seen him here before,” Song eyed Jon suspiciously.

“Are you blind, man? He is wearing the golden jacket and has a dragon by his side,” Ardroon gestured to Jon. “It would be very unwise to deny him, especially since he has silver to spare.”

Song sighed. “You’ll vouch for him then?”

“Just put his meal on my tab. Allow him to eat in peace,” Ardroon argued for Jon.

“Fine,” Song decided. “But if his animals want to eat too, it costs extra.”

“Whatever you say,” and Song went back to the kitchen while Ardroon motion for Jon to sit at his table, ignoring the uneasy stares from the other patrons.

“Thank you,” Jon said to him in goryeomal. “You didn’t have to vouch for me.”

“It’s what you would do for me, I trust? Given that we’re both strangers in this land,” Ardroon shrugged while speaking in the common tongue.

Jon smiled good-naturedly and said nothing of his ability to speak the common tongue, given the things that he had witnessed so far. “You are from the shadowlands, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Ardroon nodded.

“What brought you here?”

“Would you rather a half-truth or the full truth from me?”

“The latter.”

Ardroon chuckled. “I was a reaver who got enough loot to settle here and establish a legitimate business in this city.”

Jon blinked. “I grew up with a Greyjoy, and you don’t strike me as a reaver.”

“The ironborn?” Ardroon shook his head. “They’re good at reaving, but they’re not good at long-term thinking. The purpose of any illegitimate enterprise is to eventually achieve legitimacy. It’s safer, and you make more coin over time.”

“Not the reasons that an ironborn would give.”

“As I said, they only see what their dicks point towards and that’s why they haven’t progressed. Meanwhile, I’m not the only reaver in this city to make something of himself.”

Jon was struck by how openly Ardroon talked about his pirate past, but he chose not to offend him as he did ensure that he ate.

Eventually, the cook came with two plates of stacked beef ribs while a boy brought two other
plates of raw beef.

“The meat for the animals will cost extra, Ardroon. And I must have the payment now,” the cook said.

“They’re not animals,” Jon corrected him. “Ghost is a direwolf and Meleys is a dragon.”

“I don’t care,” the cook dismissed. “The only reason why I am letting you eat here is because your golden jacket makes it clear that you are connected to the Crown Prince.”

Jon took a bite off of the beef ribs and found himself loving the sweetness and tenderness of the meat. “And the only reason why I am eating here is because I like this beef. But since you know that I am connected to the Crown Prince, I promise that your behavior towards me will be reported to him. I’m sure that he has the power to shut you down and make you be a beggar before the week is out.”

The cook gulped.

“Be nice to the man, Song,” Ardroon told him. “After all, he might be a repeat customer.”

The cook said nothing as he went back to the kitchen. As for Jon, he pushed the beef plates to Ghost and Meleys. “Enjoy.” The direwolf quickly munched on the ribs while Meleys cooked hers with her fire, startling the customers who also watched with interest.

“So, you’re of Westeros, I take it?” Ardroon asked Jon.

“Yes.”

“You know that there is a war going on there?”

“I know.”

“Well, the war might end soon, since one of the contenders has suffered a setback.”

That got Jon’s attention. “Who do you mean by that?”

“You know Stannis Baratheon?”


“Well, he tried to sail towards the red castle with his entire army and fleet and he almost won. But then comes the lions and the roses, who struck from behind and drive him away.”

Stannis lost? This was certainly news for Jon, as he didn’t know how the war in which Robb was fighting was going. “How did you hear of it?”

“Let’s just say that I have a connection with someone who has a certain confidence with this ‘King’ Stannis,” Ardroon took a bite out of his beef ribs. “Although it’s been years since I last saw her.”

Jon didn’t know who exactly Ardroon was referring to, but he also became uneasy with his new acquaintance despite his help and the news he brought.

“Any other news that you heard of the war in Westeros?” Jon pressed him.

“Well… there is this boy king called Robb Stark that is winning victories against the lions, but I hear that the odds are against him since he can’t hope to run his war forever with the numbers he
has. He might not be long for this world.”

Jon was immediately offended at Ardroon’s words. “Be careful of who you speak of. That is my blood you are talking about.”

“Blood?” It was then that Jon realized what he had just said. “How is this boy king related to you?”

Jon cleared his throat. “I am his cousin, by his aunt Lyanna Stark and her husband, Rhaegar Targaryen.”

Ardroon stared at Jon, then at Meleys, who ignored him as she continued to eat her meal. “Right. A secret Targaryen. But I have to admit that I have seen stranger things happen in the shadowlands.”

*He’s not surprised.* But for once, Jon saw Ardroon’s reaction as refreshing. “Thank you, for not doubting me.”

“It wasn’t hard to believe what you just said. Besides, my day was getting boring and I needed someone to talk to while I ate,” Ardroon admitted.

Jon grinned, appreciating the former reaver’s honesty. “Well, then. How about I treat you for some spirits? Only seems fitting that I do so.”

Ardroon nodded, while Jon could sense that he was smiling through his red mask. “I’d like that… Targaryen.”

Jon spent the rest of the day and night with Ardroon and his other shadowmen companions, but he was sad to leave them when Prince Sumeng eventually left. “I know where you’ll be, so we’ll see each other again,” Ardroon assured him.

Jon nodded as he proceeded to move from Jinqi, and towards another village where Sumeng had to say his apologies. *I guess this is what I have to do. Go outside of the palace and meet people I would never talk to in normal settings. From there, I can develop what I need to return home in strength.*

And that was the stratagem that Jon would follow during his time here.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of political intrigue and exploration of another part of the empire. Things will get more complicated from this point.

I felt that Daenerys communicating with Jon and returning the favor for what Jon did when Drogo died seemed fitting. And oh boy. The alternate vision can only spell an ominous sign for both Jon and Daenerys.

Joon might be an able political operator, but he doesn't enjoy it. At the same time, he's willing to set aside his personal feelings if it means safeguarding the empire, especially against the Prime Minister and the unrestrained Prince Yujin.

Also, Jon's conversation with Ardroon will not be the last one and Jon will have many more conversations. And here, we hear the results of the Blackwater Bay. But after this, the events of the show will take a different turn, as I promised. We will see how
have our characters been faring while Jon was in the east.
More Additions to the Gang

Chapter Notes

Hope you all are staying safe in these uncertain times. Also, quick update. Things will be continue to be busy due to many other things. But please bear with me if I don't seem consistent in my postings.

Without ado, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alms. Alms. Alms for the poor?” Arya held out her hand while attempting her best pronunciation of the tongue of the new land she was in. She clutched her hand on the cloak she was only able to snatch from some bloke that didn’t need it anymore, which was the only thing that kept her warm and dry as the raindrops poured down on her makeshift shelter.

Adding to the frustration was that the ground from where she sat had become muddy thanks to the heavy rain while she got wetter from the carts that scurried past her and the heavy footsteps of those trying to avoid the rain. The people in this land used something that resembled a folded canopy, but with a wooden stick attached to the bottom, and that allowed them to stay dry while walking under the heavy raindrops.

But on the bright side, today was a better day than most, for her cup had some thin silver rectangles in them. She didn’t know what they were called, but she knew that these silver rectangles represented the coin here and she could thus pay for food. Nothing that I don’t know how to do.

But she also had to make sure that she had enough for the day to take care of her other two companions, both of whom had some experience in being destitute or struggling to survive, and also pay tribute to the head of the local gang. After all, anyone who begged on the streets had to pay a tax to him or suffer the consequences. Arya saw what happened when one of the other street beggars tried to pocket some of the silver rectangles for himself, for which he got caught and his mutilated body was dumped in a back alley for the rats and flies to feed on.

And it wasn’t like she had any other choice in being where she was now. She had to find shelter and food in the land they were in now, after being shipwrecked and barely leaving the shores of Westeros following what happened to her family. The memories of the Twins, the massacre of northmen there, and the Freys parading Robb’s headless corpse with Grey Wind’s head attached to it... When I come back to Westeros, anyone who took part in his death shall pay, just like the ones who boasted about cutting off Grey Wind’s head.

Not wanting to stay longer and become wetter from the rain, Arya called it a day and carefully hid her silver. She wasn’t the only one begging and there would be others trying to steal her hard-earned labor. Seeing that no one saw her, she quietly moved back into the alley where her two companions were.

The alley that they all picked was between two shops that served food, with the aroma and tastes being unfamiliar to them all. Curious, Arya took a bun without the shopkeeper looking and instantly fell in love with how sweet the beef and pork filling was. And it also warmed her insides,
which was what she needed after all of the shit that had happened to her ever since her father died.

But deciding that she didn’t want to keep thieving food, Arya approached the shopkeeper. “I… buy… buns,” she attempted in the tongue of that land. The shopkeeper smiled as he handed her six buns. “But… more… than… I… asked.” She didn’t know what had prompted his generosity.

“I know that you have taking my buns when I’m not looking,” the shopkeeper revealed and causing Arya to almost run. “Don’t worry. I was like you, white devil, starving in the streets. But I was able to make my own shop and be successful, feeding other wretches like yourself. This is me returning the favor.”

“Thank… you,” Arya slowly responded, but gratefully.

“Don’t thank me,” the shopkeeper shook his head. “And if you need more buns, just ask me.”

But little did Arya know that the shopkeeper was in league with the street gang, being one of their top collectors. And his act of kindness towards her was to ensure that they got another beggar to work for them. She found out only because she saw that same shopkeeper not be so kind to a group of children, slapping them around and taking their silver while cursing at them. When one of them spoke up, he grabbed a bamboo stick and hit him hard across the back.

Arya had to be reminded of how many times people who appeared kind were actually the evilest of all, starting from Cersei. And this shopkeeper was the latest. But she couldn’t just leave, as that would mean that she and her two companions would starve and would be at the mercy of the local gang.

Taking a bag of meat buns from the shopkeeper, who looked at her knowingly, Arya felt sick at having to be at the mercy of someone who controlled her food and abused children. But he was giving her free food nonetheless, which she couldn’t just ignore.

“Joffrey... Cersei... Walder Frey... Meryn Trant... Tywin Lannister... the Red Woman... Beric Dondarrion... Thoros of Myr... Ilyn Payne... the Mountain… the shopkeeper… Vinh…” she whispered to herself. But recently, she added two more names to her list of people that would die by her hand.

Finally reaching the place where she would sleep after she called the day, she found her two companions had already returned: Gendry from Flea Bottom and the Hound, the one who helped massacre her household when her father was arrested and the one she had to carry on a cart.

“How was today?” Gendry asked her. Looking around one more time to see if anyone was watching them, Arya pulled out the silver rectangles. Gendry was also careful, as he counted them underneath their blankets. “Well, better than yesterday.”

“But it won’t be like that every day. We have to stretch it out over the week,” Arya sat down and finally relaxed, ignoring the Hound who was still in his daze. She then handed him the sack of meat buns, but Gendry shook his head.

“I’m not going to take any more food from that bastard,” Gendry snarled quietly. “That’s how he controls us.”

“We’re under his control anyway as long as we’re here. At least we won’t have to steal food,” Arya pointed out. Gendry sighed, conceding her point before taking a bun. “What about you? How was today?”

Gendry looked at his fists, which had grown red from being cut and swollen. “The usual.”
Arya shook her head. Because he was strong, the shopkeeper had Gendry work for the local gang leader as an additional pair of hands for anyone that didn’t pay their dues. Usually, that meant whoever didn’t pay their dues got a beating and they made Gendry do it, or they’d do much worse to him, herself, and the Hound. Naturally, he hated working for the local cutthroats, since they represented all he had grown to hate from his time at Flea Bottom and he grew more unhappy with each passing day that he had to beat people who didn’t anything wrong to him.

Arya put her hand on Gendry’s shoulder. “We’ll get through this. Once we get enough silver, we’ll get ourselves a proper place and not have to beg anymore.”

“But what can we do here in this land? For all we know, we’re just a bunch of ‘white devils’ and it’s not anyone is going to give us a job,” Gendry was quick to remind her.

“At the same time, anything else should be better than what we’re doing,” Arya tried to say.

But Gendry just shook his head before pointing at the Hound. “And what are we going to do with him? He’s been smoking that shit since we got here and that’s all he does. He can’t help us.”

Arya looked at the Hound with pity. He had been in pain ever since she carted him all the way to the ship. After all that had happened, she couldn’t find it in her to let him just die, so she managed to steal a horse and a cart and came back to where he was laying, gravely injured from the fight with Brienne of Tarth. Once she found a ship that took them east, the Braavosi captain let them aboard after seeing the iron coin Arya showed him. However, he also said that he couldn’t just sail directly to Braavos since he had personal business to take care of in New Ghis and asked if Arya was okay with that. Wanting to leave Westeros and to have someone care for the Hound, she agreed and so began their voyage towards the city that was once a Valyrian colony.

While on the way, the ship came across a small boat with a man nearly dying of thirst. Recognizing him as Gendry, Arya told the captain to pull him aboard and she helped nurse him back to health.

“How did you escape the Red Woman?” Arya asked him once he fully came to.

“Ser Davos Seaworth freed me, the Hand to Stannis Baratheon. He didn’t like what Stannis was doing, so he told me to take a boat and sail west from Dragonstone. But I’ve been adrift for days now and I lost track of where I was going. I drank some seawater when I got thirsty, but that must’ve made things worse,” Gendry took a jug of freshwater from Arya, who giggled.

“Yes, I heard that would happen,” Arya set the jug down. “But I’m glad you’re safe. Good to see a friendly face while I’m sailing east.”

“But what’s he doing here? And why is he all bloodied up?” Gendry raised an eyebrow at the unconscious form of the Hound.

“It’s a long story, which I will tell once you’ve fully rested,” Arya patted his shoulder.

But as the ship was sailing further east, they were set upon by pirates and the Braavosi captain was injured. Then a storm drifted them off course from New Ghis, from which the crew had sailed past the Jade Gates and into the Jade Sea. The storm got worse and everything turned to black. The next thing Arya knew, she, Gendry, and the Hound had been shipwrecked on a faraway land. Why couldn’t have ended up in Braavos?

From what she remembered from her lessons, there was a land on the shores of the Jade Sea called Yi-Ti, which was her best guess given that the land was fairly populated and had some semblance
of governance. But they had to hide, so they got into the nearest city they saw, which was so much bigger than even King’s Landing, and thus began their daily struggles to eat and make it to the next day on the streets.

As for the Hound, his body might have recovered while they were sailing, but his mind was a different story. After they were more or less coerced into working for the shopkeeper, Sandor was drifting idly in the streets, ignoring the stares of the people from seeing what the locals called “white devils,” which applied to anyone with white skin. He then stumbled upon a man who gave him a brownish paste called yapian, which apparently came from the plant used to harvest the milk of the poppy, and from then on, the Hound started to smoke it more than five times a day.

Out of curiosity, Arya smoked it also and was struck at how… powerful the hallucinations were. She saw Gendry surrounded by hues of differing colors and felt her pain go away, if only temporarily. But Gendry knew better, as he saw too many drunks in Flea Bottom, and smacked the yapian pipe from Arya’s hand. “One is enough.”

She couldn’t blame Sandor for seeking comfort in the pipe, as there was just too much shit in his mind that the normal escapes such as those found in ale and wine were not enough. And having experienced how powerful the hallucinations were, she was tempted to allow Sandor his release, as he did save her life at the Twins.

But soon enough, Arya saw what happened when one used yapian too often. If left unchecked, the person would eventually become confused, have shallowed breathing, and then lose consciousness. She also saw a few bodies on the streets, all of them ending up dead from too much yapian. However, she didn’t know how to stop the Hound’s heavy usage at the moment, as he might lash out just as he did when Arya got too close with the fire.

Back to the present, Arya told Gendry, “You don’t know what he’s been through. But back to us, we’ll find a way.”

“Oh, really? And how exactly do you plan to get us out from under that fucking shopkeeper?” Gendry wasn’t angry at her, but at the circumstances that they were in.

Arya rubbed her forehead, trying to think of something that they could do. Then, an uninteresting idea came to her. “We rob people.”

“That’s… not very original,” Gendry shook his head.

“We need to make more coin than we do, which is little. We go to the market, look for people with deep pockets, and take what we can. We can buy our own place faster that way and then not have to worry about the shopkeeper and whoever the gang leader is,” Arya proposed.

Gendry didn’t look persuaded, as he saw people in Flea Bottom try to rob others before, which didn’t work most of the time. But considering where they were now, he didn’t see a better option.

“Okay,” Gendry assented. “Let’s go, then.”

Arya and Gendry scouted out the market, which had brightened up from the many lights that brightened the night sky. Wherever we are in Yi-Ti, they sure have an active night life.

Arya scanned who they could approach, but so far, no one looked promising. Most of the people in the market did not exactly wealthy and unlike in King’s Landing, the market was full of armed men, presumed to be responsible for maintaining order. But as it was night, their chances of escaping without being caught had increased, but they had to choose their mark carefully.
Then, Arya saw a bald man dressed in a blue robe armed with two swords, accompanied by another bald man with a cane and five guards. From what she learned from how the people in Yi-Ti dressed, they usually kept their coin pouches in their robes, meaning that they get close to them if they wanted to grab at it. And seeing that bald man with guards told Arya that he was rich and maybe worth trying to steal from if they could distract his guards and get near him.

Arya signaled Gendry to the bald man, who nodded back to her. Grabbing a water bucket, he approached the bald man and deliberately looked as if he would trip. He then spilled the water on the bald man, soaking his robes and causing his guards to look at him with indignance.

One of the guards shouted at him in the tongue of the Yi-Ti, which Gendry didn’t understand mostly and responded by shaking his head. Cocking his head, the bald man held up his hand, silencing the guard. “Where are you from, boy?” he asked him while speaking the common tongue.

Gendry’s eyes widened, not expecting their target to know what tongue he talked. “I-I-I-I-I-I” he stammered.

“You from Westeros, boy?” the bald man stood straighter while narrowing his eyes.

“Yes,” Gendry replied with hesitation.

“You are speaking to Joon Kitara, Lord of Kushiro, Governor of the Northwest Province, Field Marshal in the Imperial Army, and Master of the Horse for the Emperor. You will address him as ‘my lord,’ white devil,” the other bald man scolded him.

“I apologize,” Gendry answered, not fazed by the titles, but was at a loss at how to address the bald man, only just noticing that he was blind.

“That’s Hoon Ti, the captain of my guards. And how might I address you?” Joon asked Gendry.

“Gendry, my lord.” He kept glancing past Joon and saw Arya come closer.

“And where in Westeros do you hail from?”

“King’s Landing, my lord.” He decided to keep answer Joon’s questions, in order to keep him occupied.

“And what brings you here to our lands, Gendry of King’s Landing?”

“I was trying to find my way to New Ghis, as I heard that I can find some work there since there are no chances for me back home,” Gendry told a half-truth.

But that prompted Joon to narrow his eyes, as Gendry didn’t realize that he was not the first person to do that to him. “You know, I have a lot of influence at court here. If you don’t tell me the truth, the full truth, I will have you arrested and subject you to other methods of persuasion that won’t be agreeable to you. Do you understand me, Gendry of King’s Landing?”

Arya was then right next to Joon. “Perfectly,” Gendry said before pushing Hoon Ti off of his cane and headbutting the Lord of Kushiro, stunning him just long enough for Arya to reach into his robes and grab his coin pouch.

Both ran off into the crowd, with the guards shouting for the armed market sentries to go after them. After taking a circuitous route around the many alleyways, Arya and Gendry finally made it back to where they were staying, with the Hound finally waking up from his yapian daze.
“What the fuck were you two doing?” Sandor blinked his eyes.

“Trying to survive,” Arya looked around again before holding out the pouch. She was shocked at how big and heavy it was. Having overheard what this Joon Kitara really was, she should have expected him to be loaded with coin given that he was a lord, but this went beyond her expectations.

“This is probably enough to get us a decent place to live and not beg for a long time,” Arya said in amazement.

“Where did you get that much silver?” Sandor became curious.

“We robbed a lord, a powerful one from the looks of it,” Gendry answered.

“They have lords here?” Sandor inquired.

“Seems like it. But that lord knew how to speak the common tongue, and was pretty good at it,” Gendry noted.

“How do you figure that happening, a lord knowing how to speak with those from Westeros?” Sandor became concerned.

“I don’t know,” Gendry shrugged.

“Did he get your name?” Gendry looked at him in confusion, but Sandor’s eyes widened in alert. “Fuck, boy! You gave him your name! And now he’s going to look for you!”

“Don’t worry,” Arya tried to assure him. “We made sure that no one followed us.”

“But that much silver and a lord? Oh, no. He’s going to look for the boy, and then he’ll find us,” Sandor immediately went for the pipe to drive away his worries, but Arya grabbed it from his hand. “What in the hells was that for?!”

“Stop smoking,” Arya threw the pipe away. “I’ve seen people die from that. After all the effort of keeping you alive, I’m not going to let you go that easily.”

“You should have left me there,” Sandor said in annoyance.

“You’re welcome,” Arya shot back sarcastically. She didn’t tell him that he had added his dealer on her list.

“So, about the silver. We leave this place first thing in the morning? While the shopkeeper is still sleeping?” Gendry asked.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Arya nodded. “Then, we can get some decent food and maybe some chicken for our Hound here.”

Sandor was emotionless, but Arya could see in his eyes that he was all for that.

“Then, it’s settled. Let’s get a good night sleep and we’ll get out of this shithole for good,” Gendry moved to wrap himself with a blanket. “Sweet dreams.”

Arya kept the silver pouch close, their one chance of freedom in this land at the moment. She silently warned the Hound to not go after the pipe. After promising him chicken, Sandor sighed before trying to get some sleep.
Joffrey... Cersei... Walder Frey... Meryn Trant... Tywin Lannister... the Red Woman... Beric Dondarrion... Thoros of Myr... Ilyn Payne... the Mountain... the shopkeeper... Vinh...” Arya said aloud, the last name being the yapian dealer, as she drifted to sleep.

But a few hours later, she got a rude awakening as she stared down upon by a Yi-Tish man clad in armor and armed with swords. He shouted at her in his native tongue while dragging her out from the alley, with Gendry and Sandor already tied up. A crowd formed around where the three were, who were surrounded by some of the city sentries.

Then, Hoon Ti and Lord Joon entered the circle, their anger evident. Joon also had a bruised forehead and looked venomously at Gendry. He better not hurt him, she thought fearfully.

“Do you know we found you, white devils?” Joon asked Arya in the common tongue. She shook her head, after which Joon pointed behind her. Turning around, she saw the shopkeeper looking emotionlessly at her. “He sold you out, cutting a deal with us and bargaining for his life when we issued a city-wide order for two white devils wandering about.”

You bastard! Arya grounded her teeth at the shopkeeper, who didn’t look impressed.

“I believe you have something of mine,” Joon held out his hand. “I don’t care much about money, but I did earn it. So therefore, I keep what I earn.”

Arya slowly held out the silver pouch, sad to see that their one chance at freedom was being taken away. Snatching the pouch from her hands, Joon put it back inside his robes and crossed his arms.

“Before you unwisely tried to take what wasn’t yours, you were about to answer on how you came here,” Joon turned to Gendry. “Answer truthfully, or suffer what thieves suffer.”

That doesn’t sound good. Gendry and Sandor also thought so, so the blacksmith from King’s Landing told them of what really went happened, from their trying to hide in the riverlands, his capture at the hand of the Red Woman, and how he reunited with Arya, but with the knowledge that he was the bastard son of Robert Baratheon. The crowd looked on with interest, but they couldn’t understand since they were talking in the common tongue.

“Just imagine how much pain would have been avoided had you just told me that,” Joon sighed. “But who is your lady friend and scarred companion?” Sandor growled at what Lord Joon referred to him as. “Looks like you’re just another addict. I can smell the yapian from your breath,” he scoffed.

“They call me the fucking Hound, my lord,” Sandor answered mockingly, causing Hoon Ti to strike him hard on the scarred parts of his face with his cane. He bit his teeth down, trying to control the pain that followed as he fell to the ground.

“You’re not acting with wisdom, dog. Respect is important here, and a lack of it will come with severe consequences,” Hoon Ti scolded him.

“And you are?” Joon turned to Arya.

From how Joon conversed with Gendry and how he listened to his story, Arya sensed that the Lord of Kushiro knew much about Westeros and what was occurring. If he knows, then he surely must know the Stark name.

But having seen Joon detect lies or attempts to hide the truth and responding accordingly, Arya was conflicted on what she would do. Praying to the old gods for help briefly, she readied herself. “I am Arya Stark.”
Joon blinked, as did Hoon Ti. “Did you say… Stark? As in Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North?”

Arya was brought back to when her father died at the mention of his name, but she was shocked at how much he actually knew. “How did you know that?”

“Yes, Stark. A Stark. Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.”

“Arya Stark,” Lord Joon pressed. “Are you related to him?”

“Arya Stark admitted. “He was my father.”

“Then… do you know of Benjen Stark?”

“Arya got more shocked. “How do you know Uncle Benjen? What’s going on here?!””

“Calm down, Lady Arya,” Lord Joon knelt before him while grabbing her shoulders. “Your Uncle Benjen is safe here, and he’s doing very well. And I guess I don’t have to ask if you know who Jon Snow is.”

Her mind went blank at the mention of Jon’s name. “J-j-j-Jon? You know him?”

“He’s here as well, and he’s quite a man these days,” Joon answered. “I must say that it’s a pleasure to meet you, Arya Stark. He said much about you and to see you here is quite amazing. Although we’ll hear more of your side and answer your questions at another time. For now, I suggest you come with me along with your companions. I can take you to Jon and your uncle.”

For the first time in a long time, Arya felt hope and excitement. Always close with Jon, she was ecstatic to realize that her brother was here and apparently doing well for himself from this Lord Joon had said of him.

While still wary around this man who promised this great thing, she wasn’t going to let her fears stop her from seeing her beloved brother again. Gendry and Sandor were untied but were made to come along.

“Shit,” Sandor groaned. “Now, we’re going to see the girl’s bastard brother.”

Hoon Ti scoffed. “If only you knew who he really was, dog.”

That confused the Hound, and more so with Arya. “What do you mean?”

“All will be revealed in due time,” Hoon answered simply.

“**What does he mean by that?** Arya became frightened at the prospect of Jon not being her brother, but she was going to have her worries set aside, as seeing him and Uncle Benjen was the only thing that mattered now.

But before they disappeared from view of the shopkeeper, who was more than surprised at the turn of events, she threw him a death glare. **I will come back and I will kill you for what you’ve done to us,** she said to him through her eyes.

**I’ll be waiting,** the shopkeeper answered as if knowing what she said.

Benjen sipped the boiled chicken broth while he, Jon, and Sam were enjoying one of the few quiet times that they had for the day. Although it was a little counterintuitive to him to consume warm soup as they were still sweating against the sweltering heat of the jungles in the south, which Yin was close by, the Yi-Tish said that warm soup during hot climates was actually good for one’s health.
health, as the heat in the body could be more easily controlled during the summer. There are still many things that I don’t understand about this place.

After being promoted to lieutenant-general and appointed commander of the capital field army at Si Qo, Benjen wasted no time in studying all he could about his new headquarters and his new command. He might have had a successful time as a brigade captain, but he was now in charge of an army, which put him under more scrutiny. I have to do this right.

Hundreds of miles upriver and inland, deep in the heart of the jungle, laid the previously ruined city of Si Qo, from where the Scarlet Emperors of Yi-Ti ruled for centuries before they were pulled from power following several disastrous expeditions against the Jogos Nhai. It was from the fall of the Scarlet Emperors that the Golden Empire decided to pursue subtler methods in containing the threat from the plains in the north.

After some centuries of being abandoned, the third azure emperor decided to rebuild Si Qo as a fortress city, since he wanted to make sure that as much troops as possible could safeguard the capital itself without inflaming court or the population. Armed men were never a welcome sight, especially in a major city like Yin, and they couldn’t increase the garrison. So, the third azure emperor decreed that Si Qo would be the headquarters of the newly created Capital Field Army, which would answer to the Yin garrison commander and thus granting the emperor an entire army under his personal control.

Benjen learned that there were over five hundred thousand troops in the imperial army at any given time and those were the numbers maintained in peacetime. In emergencies, that number could increase to over a million, but that would be at peak operation and thus unsustainable in the long-term. Thanks to the policies of the third azure emperor, the current emperor had over eighty thousand men under his direct command, with twenty thousand guarding the capital itself. And that was not including those that were former soldiers and could be called up should another emergency arise.

As for Benjen, his command at Si Qo consisted of sixty thousand soldiers, all of them well-trained, well-equipped, and staffed by experienced officers. He was surprised that a third of his new command were armed with the tanegashima, making the Capital Field Army the only major unit to have black power weapons as part of its main arsenal.

After getting acquainted with his new superior officer, Captain-General Lord Gaoxu Buko, who came from an old noble family in the south, Benjen proceeded to his new headquarters but struggled with the wetness and insects that made the jungle their home. Great. What I would do for the wide space and chill for the north, Benjen longed for.

He was subjected to the various ceremonies that came whenever a new commander came, which he quickly tired of. Just like with Lord Joon, Benjen could care less for such trivialities, but to not comply would set him on the wrong foot with his new command and he couldn’t afford to slight them, as they could make his life very difficult. He was then introduced to the key officers that would help him, starting with Taelu Trinh.

“Greetings, General Stark. I am Taelu Trinh and I am your Adjutant-General,” Trinh introduced himself.

Benjen smiled, but remembered what adjutants were from his experience with Adjutant Dae. “Good to meet you, Adjutant Trinh. But I would like to ask you something. You have a problem working for me?”

“No, general,” Trinh shook his head.
“Are you sure? I am a white devil after all,” Benjen emphasized.

“I am an officer in the army, and my personal feelings should not interfere with my duties,” Trinh answered.

“I hope so. Now, tell me what I have planned for today.”

The first day in his new command was already busy, as he had to inspect the troops and meet more of his officers, including the brigade captains, the quartermaster, the generals in charge of the foot and the horse, the provost-general, and so on. He also had the troops armed with the tanegashima to demonstrate their skill, only seeing what those weapons could do a few times in the northwest province, including once against the Jogos Nhai renegades.

Walking up to one of the soldiers armed with the black powder weapon, he asked him, “How long have you fired this?”

“Five years, general,” the soldier replied. “We were the first to be armed when the army equipped us with this, so we had plenty of time to be familiar with it.”

“I can tell,” Benjen looked at the target in front of the soldier. “You’re pretty good with it.”

“Thank you, general,” the soldier was moved by his praise.

“Show me to how to do it.”

The soldier took his time to teach Benjen how to fire a black powder weapon, which usually took between thirty to forty seconds to load. In order to fire the tanegashima, he had to first insert the black powder, one or multiple iron balls, and wadding of rice paper or cloth to hold the iron balls inside the metal tube.

All of that then had to firmly inserted from the front end of the tanegashima by using a packing stick. The packing stick simply pushed the parts of the shot firmly from the front to the bottom part of the tube. Once the tanegashima is loaded, a small portion of black powder was placed in the firing plate, which was located on the side of barrel end. When the trigger was pulled, the burning hemp fuse traveled forward then downward to ignite the black powder inside the firing plate. The black powder ignited inside the tanegashima’s tube. Finally, the shot pushed out from the front end of barrel after the explosion that took place in the bottom part of barrel. The shot would fly directly toward the target, with the hitting of the mark or missing it all dependent on the shooter himself.

Reminded of how heavy it was, Benjen mounted the tanegashima on a metal pole and only then was he able to hit his target. The soldier clapped for his new commander, as did the rest of the soldiers and officers who watched their commander try. He was then taught how to wield the handheld version of the tanegashima, which was lighter but more inaccurate, which also applied when one tried to hold with a crossbow with one hand. But as an officer in the south, Benjen had to carry the handheld firearm and thus resolved to practice with it until he got it right.

While trying to fulfill his duties as commander in Si Qo, Benjen was obligated to return to the capital once every moon since he was also a vice-minister of war. He found out that the position was merely an advisory one, since all power rested with the Minister of War and vice-ministers only contributed to what the Minister would say in court. But there, he met Lieutenant-General Donju Zen, a bastard son of a northern lord who climbed all the way to the war ministry. He could tell that he had severe grievances and only focused on military matters, never discussing politics. Given how he observed how Jon was raised, Benjen couldn’t blame Donju for behaving that way. At the same time, the fact that even bastards could rise to the very top of their profession impressed
him, as bastards rarely did so back in Westeros and the Blackfyres certainly didn’t help matters.

But what struck Benjen was Prince Kaijin, who made regular appearances at the War Ministry. Unlike what he thought of princes, Kaijin Bu took his duties seriously, as he eagerly listed to what the War Minister had to say on things such as organizational reforms and the upgrading of weapons. He also inspected the troops in the capital and reviewed the fleet, even becoming friends with Lord Okamoto. But like Donju, he was not political, which Benjen thought was the key to how he survived. Despite being the son of a concubine, he still had the emperor’s blood and a claim to the phoenix throne should he choose to pursue it.

“Lord Stark,” Kaijin surprised him with his knowledge of the common tongue, even though it had a slight accent. “This must be all new to you, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t say new, Your Highness. Just different,” Benjen replied.

“I hear that your nephew, Prince Daeron, and my brother Prince Yujin came to blows again just yesterday,” Kaijin stated.

Benjen sighed. This wasn’t the first time that it happened, as Yujin was probably the worst sort to have the emperor’s blood. He heard the rumors of his personality, which included him being trained by someone who didn’t teach him restraint, but it was one thing to actually see it. While walking with Jon, they, along with Sam, saw Yujin pushing a maid to the ground before pouring her face with hot tea while shouting how displeased he was at the taste.

“Hey!” Jon shouted while he ran to the maid. “Leave her alone!”

“What is it to you, dragon?” Yujin spit on the ground near him. “She’s part of my household, not yours.”

“Do you not know common decency?” Jon spat back at him.

“What do you know about what’s right and wrong?” Yujin’s eyes flared. “And I’m older than you, so you should speak more properly to me.”

“I’m not your family, Prince Yujin. And that respect only comes when one is worthy of it, which you haven’t demonstrated,” Jon spoke.

Yujin was about to strike him with the empty tea pot, only for Ghost to growl at him, ready to pounce should he harm his companion. But instead of being afraid, he scoffed. “Of course. Your white pet. And your red dragon is still flying about, isn’t she?”

In the year that had passed since they arrived in Yin, Meleys had grown considerably, where Jon had to ask the emperor permission to build a special space for her to rest next to his palace. Although big enough to be noticed as she flew through the sky, she wasn’t large enough yet to be ridden.

“You want to see what she can do to anyone that hits me?” Jon challenged him. Yujin shook his head, but he was still unaafraid. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Then, he threw the teapot onto the floor, smashing it into pieces. “Never thought a dragon could be so soft.”

Jon was close to fuming at his words, only for Benjen to calm him down. “Let it go, Jon. He’s just acting tough and knows that he can’t hurt if you have Ghost and Meleys around.”

Jon nodded, while he checked on the maid. But the maid wasn’t as grateful as he expected.
“Your Highness, with respect, you put me in more danger. Now, Prince Yujin will come after me now,” the maid said fearfully.

“You don’t have to be his servant. You can come join my household,” Jon tried to offer, but she shook her head.

“I belong to Prince Yujin’s household, Prince Daeron, and therefore I belong to him. Unless he dies, I stay with him.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Jon expressed his frustration. “I’ll talk to the emperor and I’m sure that he will do so.”

“With respect, Your Highness, you’re a white devil and Prince Yujin is his son. What can you do for me that he would so disregard his own blood?”

“If you think the emperor is close to him, then you are mistaken. I’m sure he will listen to me once I plead your case,” Jon assured her.

Benjen found out that Prince Yujin’s mother was the emperor’s favorite concubine, having discovered her while she performed as a dancer. But she died in childbirth and the emperor blamed him for her death, which poisoned relations between them.

As Jon had promised, the emperor granted his request and the maid was transferred to his own household, where she was currently serving them tea.

Benjen looked at Jon, who was becoming more like a prince with each passing day he spent at court. As the recognized Prince of Dragonstone, the palace was adorned with the three-headed dragon banner and his personal guards wore armor with black dragon scales and red sashes. Besides his golden jacket, he wore Dark Sister on his waist and had Longclaw strapped to his back alongside a handheld tanegashima in his belt. He had continued to style his hair in the Yi-Tish top knot, while his beard was cleanly trimmed and his face looking fresh despite the wetness of the climate. Also, thanks to his continuous training with Hoon Ti and other trainers assigned to him, not a trace of fat or loose skin could be found.

More importantly, Jon remained serious and carried a strong air of certainty around him. He had long moved on from Chanhee’s death and was focused on more immediate matters, but he still had a long way to go before he could make certain his absolute survival in court. Along with being a white devil, he was too honest for the officials’ tastes, since he showed his insistence on being fair while as an assistant quartermaster and not overly flaunting his privileges as a lieutenant of the imperial guard. It also didn’t help that he refused to pay for the privilege of speaking in court, and the Economics Minister would have retaliated had it not been for Ghost and the presence of Meleys.

All in all, Jon was adjusting himself well at court. Lyanna would be proud.

As for Sam, he was still plump and continued to indulge his tastes in food. But unlike when they first came to Yi-Ti, the heir to Horn Hill was much happier and actually looked forward to his duties in the Imperial Household. Assigned as the assistant to the steward of Prince Kaijin’s household, all were relieved that he was assigned to the kinder and more able of the princes. Sam’s duties mostly consisted of making sure Prince Kaijin’s incomes came regularly and ensuring that his household remained in good condition. As expected, he was the best of the three when it came to the court dialect of guanhua, surprising many of the officials for how quickly he grasped it.

Sam was also involved in translating for the Grand Secretariat many of the works written in the
common tongue into either guanhua, goryeomal, or nihongo, for which he received one hundred silver taels for each work translated. Lord Tarly actually likes being a steward and is able to make some extra coin on the side. At least he can enjoy himself.

“How was today, Jon?” Benjen asked his nephew.

“Very good,” Jon smiled as he bit down on his boiled chicken breast. “Quartermaster Choi decided to entrust me with more responsibilities and seconded me to the Chief Commissioner, meaning that I now have the power to conduct audits.”

From what Benjen had witnessed, possessing auditing power was very potent, as it gave whoever held it the right to investigate and recommend sentences. “That’s something, although as a prince, don’t you already have that kind of power?”

“Mostly. But this shows to the emperor that I am performing my duties well.”

“That’s good to hear. What about in the imperial guard?”

“Nothing new,” Jon shrugged. “Besides witnessing Chenyin Dao’s visits to Prince Sumeng.”

By that time, they had learned that Prince Sumeng’s affair with Captain Dao was essentially an open secret among the powerful at court. But what made it worrisome was that Dao’s father, Lord Xiaochun, was a key supporter to the Prime Minister, with both families coming from old southern nobility dating back to the founding of the empire. And Lord Dao was the Prime Minister’s main contact with the monied interests in the south, so they held a lot of influence over the amount of coin that they could call upon. **Great. Prince Sumeng is a bugger of men, and his lover’s father is in the Prime Minister’s pockets. I wonder if Lord Dao wanted his son to seduce him in order to control the prince.**

“And the Princess?”

Jon hesitated. “She’s been inviting to many court functions and even for dinner. She’s also been showing up to see Meleys more often, but from a distance.”

Benjen looked up at Jon’s attendant, who happened to be Yongpo, Selah’s Jogos Nhai nephew. Jon wanted to maintain contact with Selah the Hyrkoon, so he invited one of them to the capital under safe conduct and employed him in his household. It also helped that Yongpo took the time to learn the common tongue.

Yongpo nodded, confirming what Jon said about Princess Khiara.

“Be careful, Jon. Women like her can be very dangerous if you allow them to be close,” Benjen warned.

“I have to do it carefully. If I try to push her away, I might end up in more trouble, as she does have much influence in court, especially from the navy.”

Benjen sighed, not denying Jon’s reasoning. “And you are making your own relationships?”

“Fortunately, having a dragon does open some doors. Just yesterday, I had dinner with Lord Buko’s adjutant.”

“Good. Just remember. We must—”

“Go back. I remember, but it’ll take some time before we have an army to come back with us,” Jon
answered.

Benjen nodded, satisfied that his nephew remembered his purpose. “What about you, Sam?”

“Prince Kaijin is thinking about traveling to Jinqi by next week. Much of today was spent organizing the trip,” Sam answered.

“He’s a good man, isn’t he?”

“And quite able, which is more than what I can say about Prince Sumeng, and a good man, unlike Prince Yujin. Although… I can’t help but feel sorry for him. It’s not his fault that his mother died.”

“Well… men can have some peculiar reasons to blame others, and the same with women,” Benjen remembered Catelyn’s treatment of Jon. “Nothing no one can do for him, as he chose his path ultimately.”

Sam nodded, conceding his point. “In addition, I finally translated the book on House Gardener. They gave me fifty more than my usual rate.”

Benjen patted Sam’s back. “That’s great. But remember our purpose. Don’t get too comfortable here.”

Sam sighed, sad at the prospect of eventually leaving Yi-Ti. “Sometimes, I wonder if I could be live here in another life or if the gods allowed. People here value books and if only…” He shook his head. “No use in thinking about what the past could’ve been like.”

Benjen bobbed his head. “Very true. Always look forward.”

As they continued their meal, a servant ran up to their table. “Prince Daeron, you have visitors.”

“Who?” Daeron looked at him.

“It’s Lord Joon Kitara, Hoon Ti, and three Westerosi.”

Benjen, Sam, and Jon glanced at each other. Westerosi? They followed the servant to the entrance of Jon’s palace, curious as to who their new guests were, trailed closely by Ghost, who was eating his daily serving of raw meat.

Although not as large as the emperor’s palace or Prince Sumeng’s, it was more spacious than Winterfell and very relaxing thanks to Jon’s efforts. Meleys was probably resting after a day of flying, as her resting area was right next to his house.

Benjen found Lord Joon and Hoon Ti standing at the entrance, but his heart seemed to stop after he saw two people he had not expected to see in Yi-Ti. One was the scarred man and crass member of the Baratheon household, Sandor Clegane or the Hound. But Benjen recognized that the yapian daze despite it mostly wearing off.

What in the hells happened to him?

He didn’t recognize the muscled young man, but Benjen froze upon seeing his beloved niece, the one many said took after Lyanna, the one who chafed under Catelyn, and the one who loved Jon and treated him like his brother. But what had happened in the time they were separated had clearly gotten to her, as shown from her eyes and her hair.

“Arya?” Benjen and Jon whispered out.

Arya was likewise shocked at Lord Joon’s words being true, especially since Jon was really in Yi-
Ti and was doing well for himself. After a moment of processing who was in front of her, she glanced at Ghost, and that was all she needed to know that it was clearly Jon. She wasted no time in running past Lord Joon and Hoon Ti into Jon’s arms, who kneeled down and hugged her tightly. Benjen joined in the hug, happy to see that at least one of his blood was alive, and the tears fell between them. So much might have happened, but the bonds of family could never tear apart and they allowed years of sorrow to dissipate for just one moment.

Sam, Gendry, and the Hound merely watched the scene, with the former two smiling that at least someone close to them could reunite with a loved one. The Hound looked as if he was about to puke, and not because his body was about to plead for more yapian.

Eventually, the three broke their embrace and looked at each other, their smiles wide. “Jon, Uncle Benjen, how are you two here?”

“Long story, Arya. But how are you here?” Jon asked.

“Long story,” Arya smirked before reaching over to Ghost, who happily let a familiar hand rub his neck. “Ghost is so big now.”

“Fed him too much,” Jon snarked.

“We have so much to talk about,” Arya was giddy.

Meanwhile Benjen turned to Gendry. “And who might you be, young man?”

“Gendry, my lord.”

“How do you know my niece?”

“Long story short, I saved her life when her father died,” Gendry jested.

“I could’ve taken care of myself,” Arya groaned.

“Yeah, you seemed to be doing well at that,” Gendry continued to jest.

“Do you have any food?” Sandor was growing impatient.

Benjen and Jon narrowed their eyes at the Hound. “How in the hells are you with my sister?” Jon asked firmly.

The Hound was momentarily struck by how assertive Jon was, very different from the bastard he had seen at Winterfell. “Give me some food and I’ll answer all of the questions you want, bastard.”

Hoon cleared his throat. “He is Daeron Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone. You will address him as Your Highness.”

The Hound became more shocked, but not more than Arya, who looked at Jon with disbelief.

“What is he talking about?” Arya became worried at what they were actually saying.

“Come inside, and we’ll talk. We have much to catch up on,” Jon gestured for Arya to come in.

Benjen was afraid that their bonds might not be the same once Jon told the truth, but he had faith that the old gods would not let such things be so easily broken. But he also readied himself, as he also had much explaining on his part. I guess I have to extend my stay in Yin longer. I’m not going to let Arya out of my sight.
Didn’t expect Arya, Gendry, and the Hound to appear in Yi-Ti, did you? But after thinking more about it, Arya deserves to be with family once again, and who better than Jon? Also, what she will learn in Yi-Ti will replace what she learnt in Braavos (guess what that is)

With the addition of Arya, Gendry, and the Hound, the original three will not be the only ones who learn something in the East. I hope my explanations of how they got there made sense. Also, under certain circumstances and given his messed up childhood, Sandor had the potential to become an addict and his addiction to yapian/opium would be an important subplot in Yi-Ti. But everyone will find their own strengths and have their experiences in the empire.

More importantly, Jon and Benjen can be happy that at least one of their family is alive and have living proof. They definitely have heard about the Red Wedding by this point, so Arya’s survival gives them hope to continue on.

And we have more about what Benjen, Jon, and Sam were up to in this time jump, while we will also see what's happening back in Westeros. But we will also see what exactly happened with Jon as he proceeded further in court.
Hope you all are staying safe. Things will be continue to be busy due to many other things. But please bear with me if I don't seem consistent in my postings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon poured Arya another cup of tea after he finished explaining the truth. Not only was she stunned, but she seemed to be on the verge of anger at how long the secret of his true heritage was kept from herself and the rest of the Stark brood. I would be if our positions were switched.

After having Arya, Gendry, and Sandor settled in the spare rooms of his palace and cleaned up, Jon had his cooks make more of the chicken broth and sat down at his table. It was obvious that the three of them had not had proper meals in a long time, as they immediately dug into their bowls despite it coming straight from the fire. Arya stuffed in a bunch of rice into her mouth while slurping the hot soup with her spoon, Gendry was more or less the same, and Sandor ignored the broth while going for all of the boiled chicken pieces. The Hound asked if they had ale, but Jon shook his head, understanding his pain.

But like Lord Joon and Benjen, Jon knew the yapian gaze when he saw it. It was rather… fitting for the Hound to be an addict, given that he was tactless and wasn’t exactly known to be kind. Seeing his scars back in Winterfell told Jon that something terrible happened to him, but he didn’t want to know. At the same time, seeing the Hound’s hands shake from not smoking the yapian vapors was still something that Jon had to get used to, as it showed to him just what happens when one becomes too dependent on a certain substance or need. I will never have that happen to me, he promised to himself.

With her hair slightly grown and dressed in Yi-Tish robes, Arya looked much better than the mess she was in when she first saw Jon. Jon had to admit that Gendry was very strapping and could sense that he would quickly like the Baratheon bastard. For the Hound… it’ll take a while.

Burping, Arya wiped her mouth while taking her first cup of tea. Clearly enjoying the warmth that it gave to her insides, she asked for another. Gendry also took to the tea, while Jon eventually gave the Hound the arakju, who shook from how strong it was.

“Okay, Jon,” Arya set her cup down. “Why did Hoon Ti call you Daeron Targaryen? What is going on?”

Jon sighed, preparing himself for the probability that his relationship with Arya would not be the same after he divulged the truth, but he hoped that nothing would change. He started with him and Sam almost taking the vows, Aemon and Benjen revealing that he was the son of Lyanna and Rhaegar, his travels from the Wall all the way to the Jade Sea, and what he had done in the empire while everything else in Westeros had happened. He also told Arya that he knew about what happened back home, with Winterfell burning and the Red Wedding, and was shocked when she said that she was there and saw the turncoats desecrate Robb’s corpse. When I return, the Boltons and the Freys will become piles of ashes.

Arya took a few moments to process what Jon had revealed, feeling down that her beloved brother
wasn’t really her brother at all but also trying to be happy that he was finally doing well for himself after so many years of being tormented by her mother Catelyn.

“So, you’re a prince and a dragon all along?” Arya said it more like a statement. “If only my mother knew the truth. But not that it matters now, since she’s dead.”

“I’m sorry, Arya,” Benjen told his niece. “I know that she wasn’t exactly the best mother to you, but she did give birth to you and loved you very much.”

“I know that, Uncle Benjen,” Arya smiled sadly. “I just wish… we could have talked about our problems and she wouldn’t have died with her memories being mostly comprised of her scolding me to be a proper lady.”

Jon reached and put his hands on hers. “I know that feeling. And I wish I had more time with the one I loved, but together, we can move forward. Just like old times, right?”

Arya momentarily gave Jon an empathetic look, since he revealed what had happened with Chanhee, before beaming. “And no matter what, you’re still my brother. That will never change.”

Jon exhaled in happiness, relieved that at least one thing could remain the same.

“Not to break up your tender moment, but what the fuck has the other two been doing here?” Sandor interrupted. “I know your uncle must have been busy, but I’m not sure about fatty here.”

Sam was unmoved by Sandor’s insults, having long grown past the biting words thrown his way by his father after finally finding fulfillment in his current station. “I actually did some meaningful work and can read the books here,” he told the Hound in guanhua, who didn’t understand. “Can you read, you ignorant fuck?”

Jon and Benjen looked at Sam with surprise, not realizing that the heir to Horn Hill could also be cheeky.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” Sandor stood up, knowing that Sam said something bad to him despite not speaking guanhua. Before he made a move, Yongpo drew his sword and stuck it underneath his chin.

“I would suggest that you sit back down, you dog,” Yongpo warned in the common tongue.

Sandor laughed at the accent the Jogos Nhai had when he spoke. “Never had I heard such words be butchered by someone with an ugly head.”

Before Yongpo could respond to that insult, Jon slammed the table, scaring Arya, Gendry, Benjen, and Sam while surprising the servants. “I allowed you in my palace, cleaned you, and fed you, and this is how you repay me?”

“Not so long ago, you were a northern bastard. And now, you let your blood get to your head, just like with the cunt Joffrey,” Sandor shot back, causing Arya and Gendry to cringe while Benjen was about to lose his temper.

As for Jon, his eyes darkened, causing the Hound to flinch just slightly at the supposed bastard having anger. “I… am… nothing… like… Joffrey,” he said while emphasizing each word. “And I had no idea that you were so stupid. Then again, it’s probably the yapian clouding your mind, and we both know that drink or whatever causes us to be so reliant on our desires can make us say foolish things. So, I will let this slide, for now.”
The people at the table looked at Jon in confusion.

“But unless you want to go back to the streets and live like a wretch, you will follow my rules, you will be respectful, and you will pull your weight around here. In this land, you keep what you earn, but you gain nothing by doing nothing. If you choose to follow those simple rules, then I will allow to live here while I will look around to see where you can be useful. I have connections in the capital and I’m sure that a big, dumb man like you could useful somehow,” Jon gave his ultimatum.

Sandor was unresponsive to Jon’s insults, causing him to scowl. “If you choose not to, before I throw you back into the streets, I will cut you with my swords and then give you a taste of what a dragon can do. And I’m not just talking about my blood.”

Arya blinked, as did Gendry and the Hound. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Jon nodded, remembering that he didn’t mention Meleys. “Come with me.”

“Uncle Benjen, where’s he going?” she asked.

“Looks like your dream will finally come true, Arya,” Benjen eagerly followed Jon before the rest did.

The group followed to the southern part of his personal palace complex. Following the rules of feng shui, anything related to the fire element had to be in the south part of any building. Jon still had much to learn regarding the cultural thinking of Yi-Ti, but what he learned so far allowed him to think in ways that he would have never thought possible. But just because it’s different doesn’t mean it’s better than those in Westeros. We developed ways of thinking based on what our ancestors faced, and so did the people here.

Finally, they came to Meleys’ resting area, which was a simple open space that allowed her much room to move around. He also didn’t use chains, as he trusted his dragon to not do anything stupid.

Even though Meleys was sound asleep, Gendry’s and Sandor’s eyes widened, seeing a live dragon not being in their wildest dreams. Gendry only a little dragon blood in his veins, courtesy of his Targaryen great-grandmother, and it was certainly not enough to bond with one. Still, it awed him that a creature so feared back home was alive and well.

But their reactions paled when compared with Arya’s. Long having idolized Visenya Targaryen and the other female members of House Targaryen, she felt as if all of her hopes have been fulfilled, as she was now thinking of riding the dragon and burning her enemies as did her heroine. Even though she didn’t have Targaryen blood, it didn’t stop her.

“What’s her name?” Arya was eager to know all she could about the dragon.

“Meleys,” Jon answered.

“After the Red Queen.” Studying the dragons made her know each of them by heart.

“Exactly,” Jon rubbed her hair.

“May I touch her?” Arya could only imagine what those scales felt like.

“You don’t have dragonblood, so she might not be as accepting to you like me,” Jon told her. “But… maybe you could get a good start by feeding her.” Jon pointed to a pile of fresh cow legs, which was covered with a tarp.
Jon and Benjen helped Arya grab a fat cow leg and dragged it near Meleys, but he had his sister move it the rest of the way.

Then, to Arya’s surprise, Meleys’ nostrils sniffed the meat’s scent. Opening her eyes, she raised her head and went on all four of her hinds. Curiously looking at Arya, she stared at the cow leg before looking back her. She kept skill as Meleys’ head inched closer to her body before taking in her scent deeply. She growled softly, but she gave no malice to her. *This one smells differently,* she told Jon.

*She’s my sister,* Jon answered.

*And this is her way of introducing herself to me?*

*How else have you grown so fast and so much?*

Meleys huffed in amusement. *Well, tell her if she wants to keep being near me, she better bring along some pigs. I’m suddenly craving for some roasted pork.*

*I’ll tell her, girl,* Jon chuckled.

“What?” Arya glanced at Jon.

“She wants you to bring some pigs the next time you come near her,” Jon told her what Meleys said.

“You can talk to her?” Arya’s surprise kept growing.

“I can understand her,” Jon nodded.

Suddenly, Meleys opened her mouth and bathed the cow leg in dragonfire, causing Arya to shriek and jump back.

“Okay, now that is what a dragon does,” her skepticism was completely wiped away. “My, my. You really are a dragon, Jon.”

“And a wolf. Don’t forget that,” Jon patted her shoulder as the party watched Meleys enjoy her snack.

The next morning came and Jon called for his own steward before gathering Arya, Gendry, and Sandor together. Benjen remained in his palace while Sam had to report for duty at Kaijin’s household.

“Okay. As I said last night, all of you have to pull your weight around here,” Jon began. “Before I go further, how well do you know each of the tongues in Yi-Ti?”

“Tongues? They speak more than one?” Gendry asked.

“Three. Guanhua is the main tongue of the empire and in court, goryeomal is mostly used in the eastern provinces, and nihongo is the language of the army and fleet. Don’t ask questions on why that is because it’ll take too much time at the moment, and I have duties to attend to,” Jon answered. Gendry and Arya nodded in understanding, while Sandor remained indifferent. *We’ll see about that once he hears what I require him to do.* “So, starting tomorrow, you will spend each morning learning how to speak all three tongues, because without being about to communicate, you won’t survive. Then, you will undergo additional education regarding the history, mannerisms, and other areas of Yi-Ti during afternoons. In the evenings, you come back here, sup with me, and...
get ready to go to bed. That’s the daily routine that the both of you have.”

“Both?” Arya looked at Gendry and Sandor, but she knew that Jon was referring to the latter.

“I’ll get to the Hound later. Gendry,” he turned to Arya’s companion from King’s Landing. “I’ve spoken to Lord Joon and he recommended that you join the army here.”

“What?” Gendry did not expect that.

“He said and I quote, ‘A man of Gendry’s size and physique will be of much better use bearing arms, but he first must know how to bear arms for the emperor.’”

Gendry shook his head. “I can’t do that, Prince Daeron. I’m just a blacksmith and I don’t know how to fight.”

“That’s what the army does for you. You will undergo ten weeks of training with the capital garrison here and you will be placed in the infantry. At the same time, you will also study for the examinations here.”

“I beg your pardon?” Gendry’s mind went blank.

“You might be a bastard of Robert Baratheon, but that’s no excuse to not live as best you could. Plus, you have just a little dragon blood in you and that makes you my distant cousin, so I’ll be damned before I let those with dragon blood be idle,” Jon declared.

Gendry didn’t expect that, as no one apart from his mother said such sentiments to him. “I thank you, Prince Daeron.”

“The best way to thank me is to do well in training and for your examinations. Once you pass them, you’ll become an officer and then the quality of your life will improve. From there, whether your progress upwards or ruin your prospects is on you,” Jon said. “Is this acceptable?”

“I’ll try my—” But Jon shook his head.

“You do, or do not. There is no try,” Benjen told him straight. “And I have an acquaintance with the commander of the capital garrison here, Lord Buko, so I will be able to get daily reports on your training.”

Gendry took in a deep inhale before exhaling slowly. “I’ll do my best.”

“You better,” Jon turned to Arya. “Now, you will need to learn how to interact with the other ladies in court here. At the same time, since you don’t want to be a proper lady, I will have Yongpo teach you how to properly ride a horse, hunt, and wield weapons. In the meantime, I will look for someone that can properly teach you combat arts. But for now, I ask you to concentrate on your studies and make some friends here. You don’t have to like them, but whoever you talk with can save your life. Can you do that for me?”

Arya looked daunted at what Jon asked her to do. At the same time, she knew that Jon had her best interests in heart and saw his earnestness in what he recommended, seeing that he had to make his own friends despite his personal feelings. “All right.” She then pulled out Needle, the one tool that she kept close by and her keepsake from Jon before they were separated for a long while. “I kept this, Jon, because it showed how much you understood me. It’s only right that I trust you now.”

Jon beamed, touched by his sister’s words. He then unbuckled Dark Sister from his waist and gave it to Arya. “This is Dark Sister, Arya. It was given to me by Aemon.”
Arya looked as if she was touching a relic, as her hands gently held onto the legendary blade of Visenya Targaryen. She was in awe of the sword, with Gendry appreciating the craftsmanship and Arya imagining herself as Visenya for a brief moment before returning it to Jon.

But his smile disappeared when he then came to Sandor.

“Let me guess,” Sandor wasn’t going to let Jon speak. “I have to join the army, or be a guard to one of the many fat pricks in court? Nothing I don’t know how to do.”

“You will not do anything for now,” Jon pulled out a slip written in guanhua. “I cannot trust an addict to perform to the best of his abilities, so before I give you work, you will take that to the Imperial Physician, where he will recommend certain places that you can use to recover from your yapian addiction.”

Sandor blinked while his jaw stiffened. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“He means that until you have overcome your need to drown your problems in yapian, you will follow the Imperial Physician’s recommendations and report to where he directs you to,” Benjen spoke for his nephew. “Being reliant on substances interferes with your ability to perform even simple tasks and you cannot be trusted to overcome it by your own efforts. When you are deemed fit, then you will be able to get some work.”

Sandor stood up. “You’ve got to be fucking jesting with me! Why the fuck would I trust people I don’t know to take care of my body? I don’t even trust maesters!”

Jon slowly rose from his seat. “I need to know if you are willing to better yourself, since you clearly don’t care about what you do. That has to end, since what you do and how you do it will be scrutinized. And I’ll tell you this. The people here, especially the powerful, place a lot of importance on images. You present a bad one, not only will you not have people who can help you, your chances of dying will increase by a lot. And if you so much become a nuisance, they won’t hesitate to make you suffer and kill you in the most painful ways possible.”

“I’ve suffered all there is, boy,” Sandor pointed to his face.

But Jon shook his head. “No. You have not. But unless you want to find out, I strongly suggest that you go to the Imperial Physician and follow his directions. Once you have recovered, we’ll talk again on what you can do. Do you understand me?”

Sandor knew that there was no arguing with Jon by this point, so he took the slip and sat back down.

As for Arya, she became more struck at how much Jon had changed for the better. No more was he the boy who kept his head down, and he became one who could even persuade the Hound to do something while outlining the consequences of not complying.

Jon looked at the sundial. “Ah, I must leave now. Uncle Benjen, can you please show Arya and Gendry around the city? I have to report to Quartermaster Choi.”

“Of course,” Benjen nodded.

“Quartermaster?” Arya asked.

“I’ll explain it to you once we’re in the larger city,” Benjen gestured Arya and Gendry to follow me.
“What about me?” Sandor asked Jon.

“Oh, you have to go to the Imperial Physician today. The sooner that you follow his directions and recover, the better,” Jon revealed.

Sandor groaned, exchanging one last look at Arya and Gendry, before a servant led him to where the Imperial Physician resided in the Emperor’s palace.

“I’ll see you both tonight, okay?” Jon promised. Arya gave him another tight hug before eagerly following their uncle onto one of his personal carriages.

Jon arrived at the capital garrison’s headquarters, which was more of a complex spread out all over the Gongxeng Quarter, the area of the capital where mostly military officers and government officials resided. The one next to it and the one closest to the imperial palaces, the Fengshin Quarter, was where the most powerful figures in the empire resided, which included the prime minister and powerful lords from the provinces such as Lord Joon when they had to appear in court.

Entering the quartermaster’s pavilion, where he allowed his guards and servants to take their leave until his day’s work was done but having Ghost come with him, Jon arrived at his desk, which was the closest to Quartermaster Choi’s rooms, and began his duties of the day. He sifted through various papers that concerned with matters such as supply deliveries and tips from Choi’s informants. And since he now had the power to audit, he could investigate any irregularities at his own discretion. Better use it wisely.

But that day, Jon discovered a discrepancy in the volume of rations and boots to a certain cavalry brigade seemingly under the command of the Capital Field Army. What made Jon interested was that this brigade was receiving more rations and boots than was required during peacetime, enough to feed six thousand while the regular strength was five thousand. In addition, this brigade was currently seconded to the capital garrison itself instead of under Benjen’s command, so this either pointed to an error in the paperwork or something else was happening.

Jon brought his findings to Quartermaster Choi, who looked over his case. “What exactly is the problem, Prince Daeron?”

“I would like permission to check this brigade and make inquiries as to why they are receiving more boots and rations than is necessary for peacetime, Quartermaster.”

“Could be a simple reporting error,” Choi was skeptical. “It’s quite common, given how much paperwork goes around here.”

“But if you look carefully, Quartermaster, it’s not just once they received such high volumes. This goes back two years. Two years!” Daeron pointed on the papers. “And what is a brigade supposedly part of the Capital Field Army doing here instead of at Si Qo?”

“Surely, your uncle wouldn’t mind if one brigade was out of place,” Choi shrugged.

Jon became increasingly frustrated. “I’m sure if he was here, he would also report this irregularity to the proper authority. Now, I know that one brigade might not be major in the larger scheme of things, but it shouldn’t hurt to check this one. Maybe it is as you say, in that this could be an error in the paperwork. But if it’s not, don’t we have cause to investigate?”

Choi looked over the papers again, sighing. “You have auditing power, Prince Daeron. It’s your decision.”
“Thank you, Quartermaster,” Jon turned to leave.

“But I would suggest that you tread carefully. Many eyes are on you,” Choi warned, confounding Jon before he continued towards the outside.

With Ghost and his personal entourage, Jon went to Yin’s suburbs, where the brigade was at. Arriving at the headquarters, he was shocked to find no guards posted at the entrance. What is this?

Entering inside, he found no soldiers, no horses, and nothing else related to the army in the complex. Instead, he found empty houses and barracks. Where’s the brigade?

Then, he heard some laughing inside one of the pavilions. He turned to one of his guards and told him, “Check the barracks. There has to be soldiers here. If there are, have them fall in line.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the guard dipped his head before the others spread out. As for Jon, he went closer to the source of the laughter, which happened to be in one of the officer’s pavilions. Sliding open the doors, he found three men drinking and chasing around four women, the men wearing army uniforms and the women probably coming from one of the many pleasure establishments in the capital.

They all stopped laughing and playing when they saw Jon and Ghost enter. “Ladies, I think you better go,” he gestured to them while putting his hand on Dark Sister’s hilt. Getting the message, the women scurried out of the officer’s pavilion, leaving the men to have to deal with the irritated prince.

“Who the hell are you, white devil?” one of the officers adjusted his robes while walking up to Jon.

“I assume that you all have an officer of the day?” Jon ignored his words.

“Yes, we do. That would be me,” the officer puffed his chest out.

“Really?” Jon made clear his contempt after seeing their behavior.

“Yes. Battalion Lieutenant Quoc. And you are?” he sized Jon up.

Jon turned around, seeing his guards managing to find a few soldiers from the barracks and lining them up, before turning back to Lieutenant Quoc. “I’m Lieutenant Daeron Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone.” The smugness of Quoc and the other two men caught frolicking disappeared, and all closed their eyes at how dismissive they were towards him. “You’ve heard of me,” he sensed.

“Yes,” Quoc stammered. “You… you rescued the Crown Prince from the Jogos Nhai, Your Highness.”

“But you haven’t heard of a guard detail?”

Quoc blinked in confusion. “Your Highness?”

“Why wasn’t there a guard at the gate?”

“Ah, well,” Quoc continued to stutter. “I… I don’t know, Your Highness.”

“You don’t know?” Jon raised his voice. “You say that you are officer of the day, but there is no guard mounted. Unless you count dancers and tea servers as your personal guards, given how well
they took care of you.”

Quoc remained silent while the guards kept checking the line of the few soldiers they found.

“Now, that is my personal guard checking to see if your soldiers are really soldiers. What I will you the rest of you do is to march in formation and stand at attention until I am satisfied that you are part of the army. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the other two officers acknowledged.

“Well, get a move on,” Jon ordered. When one of them was walking too slowly for his taste, he gave him a push on the back. “Move it!” He returned to Lieutenant Quoc. “Now, Lieutenant, please count how many men you see.”

“Twelve, Your Highness,” Quoc replied.

“That’s funny. Records indicate that you are currently drawing rations and boots for six thousand men. Do you mind explaining that?” Quoc merely shook his head. “Where is the brigade?”

“I don’t know, Your Highness.”

“Who is in command?” I’m going to skin the back of whoever is in charge of this farce.

“Brigade Captain Van-thu Roh, Your Highness.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know, Your Highness.”

“For gods’ sake, man!” Jon whipped around. “Is there anything that you do know?” To his credit, Lieutenant Quoc kept silent. “Come with me.”

The two inspected the twelve soldiers of the largely nonexistent cavalry brigade, all of them either half-dressed or their armor and uniforms in poor condition.

“All right. Who’s the senior soldier here?” Jon looked at the line as one middle-aged man stepped forward. “What’s your name and how long have you served?”

“Wanyu, Your Highness. I’ve served for nineteen years,” he answered.

“Just one more year until you can retire with full benefits,” Jon noted.

“That’s the plan, Your Highness.”

“How long have you been in this brigade?”

“Nine moons, Your Highness.”

Jon then noticed that Wanyu leaned more on his left than his right side. Walking up to the old soldier, he examined his right leg. “What happened to your leg, Wanyu?”

“I was in the war against the two usurpers against His Augustness, Your Highness. I got an arrow in the thigh and it got infected, but I didn’t want to become a cripple. Better to have a limp and endure some discomfort than have people look down on you.”

Jon sighed, fully understanding what he meant and thinking back on what happened to Bran.
I hope you’re still alive. “How did you come here?”

“My leg was getting more bothersome, but I was told that this brigade had an easy posting and that I didn’t have to march as much I used to. I sought to spend the rest of my last year in the army in some comfort,” Wanyu answered.

Jon nodded, trying to understand but also knowing that something else was going on. “So, you’ve been here just for a while then?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Have you handled any of the papers here?”

“Occasionally, Your Highness.”

“All right. Let’s see the current status of this brigade then,” Jon pointed to where the records pavilion was supposed to be.

“Your Highness, allow me to show you our records,” Lieutenant Quoc offered nervously.

But Jon brushed him off. “Rather have an old soldier with a good reason to be here tell me what’s going on rather than someone who plays with women instead of doing his duties.”

Wanyu took Jon to the records pavilion, where Jon was shocked that there was actual roster on the brigade’s members, who were nonexistent. “How come the brigade is currently getting rations and food if there are just twelve men here?”

“I’ve been in the army for a long time, Your Highness,” Wanyu responded. “Some units and some commanders are better than others, but those who enjoy privilege are the ones who make the decisions around here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“But even those born with privilege can find it hard to maintain it throughout their lives, and it’s hard to make any success in a regulated environment as the empire,” Wanyu continued. “So, it’s not common for certain commanders to cut corners in order to get some profit.”

“But wouldn’t that decrease the quality of the army as a whole, if the coin is being used for soldiers that don’t actually exist?” Jon inquired.

“Well, Your Highness, not everyone here shares your evenhandedness and those who try to fix what’s going here can find themselves in major trouble, especially if there are other people profiting from cutting corners,” Wanyu pointed out.

“This would never happen in the northern provinces,” Jon remembered how Lord Joon ran things.

“I’ve been in the north, Your Highness, and if you’re looking to make a profit, you’ll be caught quickly. But here in the south, such scruples are not so favorably looked upon,” Wanyu shrugged.

“Can you show me the arsenal then?” Jon’s attention drifted to another part of the brigade’s headquarters. As expected, each of the weapons looked as if they just came out of the smith and had never been used before. “At least I can be glad that whoever is running this scheme has the good sense not to profit off weapons.”

“Oh, there are limits to how far their schemes can go,” Wanyu stated. “Army-issued weapons on
the markets will certainly lead to the wrong kind of attention and that’s one thing that whoever is in charge wants to avoid. Better to cut corners with the rations and boots.”

“You suspect Lieutenant Quoc to be involved?” Jon asked him.

“It’s possible. But considering that he just came here three moons ago, it’s unlikely that he is one of the instigators,” Wanyu offered his opinion.

“Thank you, Wanyu,” Jon patted his shoulder. “But why tell me this?”

“Might not make a difference in the long run, given that any action taken here will offend some people who make coin off of this scheme, and those people have more power than I can ever fathom. And you, Your Highness, I know who you are, but you don’t know these people. They won’t just let you ruin how they make their money for the last several decades. You better be prepared for what will come your way.”

“Appreciate the advice, Wanyu,” Jon gave a small smile before he turned to leave. “I’ll see if I can find something else for you. Since you talked to me, it’s best that you are assigned somewhere else for your last few months.”

Jon wrote down his report regarding the brigade and submitted it to Quartermaster Choi. But suspicious on how Choi behaved when he first approached him, he wrote down a copy and stuffed it in his robes. *Best have some alternates should Choi be not the man I expected him to be.*

With the work with the quartermaster done for the day, Jon made his way back to the imperial complex where he would report to Captain Dao. But before he did, he found Khiara also going in the same direction.

“Princess Khiara,” Jon greeted her.

“Prince Daeron,” she responded before smiling at Ghost. “And your direwolf.” Ghost blinked at the princess, unsure of how to respond given that she posed no obvious threat but will wary. “He’s not certain what to make of me, right?”

Jon continued to be impressed with how perceptive she was. “I wonder if I am the only one who is bonded with Ghost. You seem to understand him well.”

Khiara grinned. “Well, direwolves and dragons are creatures that cannot be judged by the standards of other animals from what I’ve read, and I am interested in the uncommon.” Jon glanced at the ground before looking back up to Khiara’s face. “I have some affairs to attend to with my father. Perhaps we can have some time to talk while you also move towards my brother’s palace?”

After a year, Jon was still uneasy about Khiara, but he also understood that he couldn’t just push her because of his personal feelings. “Yes, we can talk.”

Khiara and Jon walked side by side through the open-air halls of the complex, with Ghost trailing behind and their combined guards and servants behind the direwolf.

“So, I’ve heard that your cousin just arrived at your palace last night, having spent some time as a common beggar and brought along two companions, one of whom is a distant cousin but a bastard.”

Jon wasn’t surprised that she knew, given how many eyes and ears she had throughout the complex. “I’m very happy that she’s alive, especially with the recent events back in Westeros.”
“Yes, I’ve heard about them also. Your other cousin being murdered at a wedding along with his mother and Volantene wife, more of your cousins disappearing… as I have said before, you have my sympathies,” Khiara offered. Jon couldn’t tell if she was sincere. “I understand that his cousin of yours, Arya Stark, was quite dear to you when you were growing up.”

“She was,” Jon confirmed. “She treated me like a brother when most of the others believed me a bastard. And last night showed us that nothing changed between us.”

“That’s good. Family can either make or break you, but it’s heartening to hear that you have had a loving family growing up. I cannot say the same for mine.”

“Yes, Prince Yujin is quite… something,” Jon was hesitant to slander him even though he loathed him since she didn’t know how she would respond.

To his relief, Khiara chuckled. “You have no idea about Yujin. I know that you saved the maid, which is noble of you, but he must’ve taken out his frustrations on something or someone else. Anger is a constant with my half-brother and you’d be wise as to not have it directed at someone you care about. But he also likes conflict, since he has a need to show who’s in control and who’s stronger.”

“That is not surprising,” Jon answered.

“And since we’re talking about my brothers, I never did get your true opinion on my baby brother, Sumeng. What do you think of him?”

Jon understood that this was an important question. How he answered it would determine whether Khiara would either leave him in peace or go after him as a rival. *Arya is with me now. I can’t risk her.* “Sumeng is a good man and I’m sure with a little discipline, he might become a proper heir to the throne. But my main problem is that he claims to take care of his people well, since he didn’t take care of someone else who rescued him,” Jon decided to tell the truth without overtly insulting him.

“You are referring to your Chogo woman. Chanhee, wasn’t it?”

Jon’s eyes softened, struck that Khiara actually knew her name. “Yes. But everything she got was after she died and no one else talks about her. She’s now just another memory drifting in the wind, and what’s the point of punishment if she is not coming back?” He unintentionally allowed some of his bitterness to be revealed.

Khiara sighed, as if trying to understand his feelings. “My brother is like that. He might be fond of his wife Su-young, but he is fonder of Captain Dao. Probably, the only reason why he even thanked you was because you had a dragon and a direwolf, and Chanhee had nothing. Sumeng might say he treats people well, but he’s attracted to whoever can make him powerful and strong. Dao is everything he looks for in a man, and Chanhee probably didn’t offer him much in terms of what he wanted in a woman.”

Now that Jon thought about it, it did make sense, which made it more hurtful.

“But for me, I know what it’s like to be discarded because others don’t see you as offering much to them, at least the parts that they can take,” Khiara continued wistfully. “Even though my father sees value in me, most of the others didn’t until much later. I learned that power is based on perception, with men going for whoever looks the strongest. As for women, we have to use our minds since men will never respect us for anything else, to a certain extent,” Khiara was wise not to make any implications of all males to Jon, since men like Lord Joon and Lord Okamoto dealt with
her as they did other officials.

“What about the women in the Jade Order?” Jon remembered the group of women bodyguards charged with protecting the female members of the imperial family. *Arya might like them.*

“It took fifty women of the Jade Order dying in combat to make the empire see that females can be just as capable in combat as men can. But strength is important also for women, since we will be vilified if we falter,” Khiara revealed.

Jon had to concede that was true, given how many stories were circulated that painted Visenya Targaryen as a malevolent queen when it was just probably men just trying to make up for their fragile egos.

“Why tell me this, Princess Khiara?” Jon didn’t expect so much openness from her, given what she was like when not interacting with him.

“You have great potential power, Prince Daeron. But I don’t think that you really know how to utilize it. It’s good that you’re fair, but fairness can cost you very much and make you predictable. Power is most effective when you can surprise your enemies and overwhelm them.”

“Why are you concerned with whether or not I survive against my adversaries?”

“Because… a dragon should not be so easily taken down and I’ll be honored to have played a role in making a dragon stronger,” Khiara divulged.

Jon was taken aback. He didn’t know if she had genuine concern for his welfare, or she was just like Sumeng in that she was attracted to power. But given that she was not giving him threats, he decided that it was best to indulge her, as she could be one of his potentially powerful allies in court against the foes that were increasing in numbers against him. *Plus, Arya needs to be safe and Khiara could be the key to that.*

“I also hear that Arya came with a sword. Does she have some fighting skill?”

Jon didn’t expect the change in conversation. “I don’t know, but she doesn’t want to be called a lady if that’s what you’re asking.”

Khiara laughed. “Oh, she’s a fighter. She might be a good addition to the Jade Order, after some training, of course.”

Jon blinked. “I’m not sure if she’ll like that.”

“I think you should allow to speak for herself on such matters,” Khiara answered. “Perhaps we can discuss this over dinner, with Lady Arya present?”

Jon wasn’t easy about having Arya so close to Khiara, since she might not have obviously devious designs on her, but the worry was there anyhow. However, he did promise that he would find someone to help her fight and who better than the Jade Order?

“T’ll let her know,” Jon assented.

“Excellent,” Khiara smiled before moving to the emperor’s palace. “I look forward to meeting the young lady then.”

Jon watched Khiara for a brief moment, conflicted on what he felt about her. But he kept saying to himself, “Don’t get distracted.” He couldn’t deny that she was beautiful, but under certain
situations, she could be dangerous.

Concurrently, he couldn’t help but think that given Khiara’s conflicts making her so crafty, he worried about his aunt turning out the same way. *Please, don’t let Aunt Daenerys lose her heart even though she has to be strong. What’s in here may be all that matters, so help her keep it, Jon prayed.*

On the bright side, he now didn’t have to worry about keeping Arya busy, as she would train with some of the finest warriors he had seen. *Who knows? She might wield Needle and a katana when everything is finished.*

Chapter End Notes

So, we have Jon delegating the tasks accordingly to Arya, Gendry, and Sandor, just like Lord Joon did, and we have more of Jon being assertive. But even though Sandor might make it out of whatever Jon has him do, he will still struggle with opium addiction, just like the rest of us with things like games, movies, or other things that take up our time.

Jon is discovering a discrepancy in the army that will soon snowball into a major conflict, one with deadly consequences. It's based on the '90s series SHARPE, with our boy Sean Bean in one of his few not-dying roles :D

And Khiara and Jon are on somewhat good terms, but Jon can't just turn away Khiara because he's uneasy about her. At the same time, is Khiara really 100% calculating? Something to think about.

For those who are curious as to Robb surviving, I wouldn't have put the tags there if I wanted him dead. But, I will reveal how he is alive in good time. Please be patient :)

All in all, I hope this is good.
Hi, guys! Hope you are all continuing to be safe. Been busy still, but I will continue to update.

I'm currently trying to balance the Yi-Ti arcs with showing you all what is happening elsewhere in the world of ice and fire, but please understand because it is very easy to mess up the balance and bungle up the story. Rest assured, I will only release the best content that I can, since that is what you all deserve.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam accompanied Prince Kaijin to one of the many teahouses in near the imperial palaces in Yin. One of the things that he learned about the emperor's son was that he saw the teahouse as a way to escape from the chaos that came with court life. The teahouse as a place represented special meaning to Kaijin, as his mother met the emperor, who was a younger and fitter man, while she served him tea in one of these places.

Sam had to admit that Kaijin picked a good place to escape from court, as there was more liveliness to such establishment than he had seen elsewhere. Teahouses were once the domain of monks, who came there to consume tea as part of their meditations. But once people began to realize the benefits of drinking tea as part of their daily routine, the teahouses began to become popular and assumed a social function. It was probably one of the few places in the empire where people from all walks of life could gather and converse with one another without being concerned about their station.

One had to simply enter a teahouse, pay the fee of one silver tael, and that's all they had to in order to enjoy a cup of tea and more importantly, what came with it. Usually, patrons came with their companions or whoever they were courting, and they would engage in conversations as they sipped their cups. Topics included which bards were in style, the state of affairs in the court, and other matters of interest to society. Why doesn't Westeros have these kinds of places?

Gossip was also included in such conversations, which would explain why the teahouses were also watched by officers from the Central Column, a group from the Imperial Army Provosts that answered only to the Captain of the Imperial Guard and charged with spying on the population for any threats against the emperor. As soon as they entered the teahouse, Sam had a good guess on who was from the Central Column, since their posture and hard look in their eyes gave them away. Even though teahouses served an important purpose, potentially seditious or even treasonous talk did find their way into the conversations that took place there and the empire had more than their share of those who were dissatisfied with the current order. A key purpose of the Central Column was to closely observe the teahouse patrons, but they would never act immediately upon hearing subversive words, as that would only cause the probable agitators to simply move their conversations elsewhere and making them more difficult to find.

But Sam was not privy to how the Central Column operated, as grasping the very nature of that shadow formation was like trying to grab smoke. Also, Chenyin Dao made clear his disdain for the white devils, since he said, "You lot made a mockery of how things work here." He knew that
Captain Dao was referring to how he, like Jon and Benjen, had obtained high positions in the empire without the many years studying for the examinations and working their way up. Jon didn't help matters since he refused to pay the privilege to the Economics Minister.

Sam had to be thankful that he was merely an assistant to Prince Kaijin's steward, as he could closely observe court but was seen as too far away to be important. And he could focus on his books and translate those written in the common tongue for extra coin on the side, as scholarly pursuits were highly encouraged by the paper bureaucracy of the empire.

Also accompanying them was Gendry, the newcomer from King's Landing and the bastard son of Robert Baratheon. To Sam's surprise, Kaijin got along with Gendry given that both of their parents were not married, and both clearly knew what was right and wrong. In addition, Kaijin surprised Gendry by being able to speak the common tongue, but with a heavy accent.

"You think you're the only white devil who have managed to come to these lands?" Kaijin asked Gendry.

"After everything I had seen, Your Highness, I wouldn't be surprised," Gendry replied.

"Since when did you speak the common tongue, Your Highness?" Sam was also surprised, as Kaijin never gave any indication that he did.

"Well, I wanted to see just how much you know our tongues, and you impressed me," Kaijin shrugged. "It says much about one's character when they make an effort to adopt customs that they didn't grow up with."

"Thank you," Sam showed that he was flattered.

"Don't mention it. Now come. Let's have some tea," Kaijin led them to a table.

Many of the teahouse patrons bowed to Kaijin, as he was a prince and a recognized son of the emperor after all, but he paid no mind and told them to continue with their conversations. As for the teahouse owner, it was clear that he and Kaijin knew each other and instantly knew what the prince liked to drink.

"I recommend the jasmine tea, Gendry. It's very soothing and it gives off a nice smell," Kaijin told him.

"If you say so, Your Highness."

"Please. Call me Kaijin. After all, we're both bastards in everyone else's eyes," he smiled.

Gendry grinned back. "Kaijin."

As he said, the jasmine tea gave off a relaxing scent and a warm feel when it entered their bellies. Sam had a feeling that Kaijin learned to appreciate tea while being trained by a warrior monk, with those men being able to cope with the chaos of combat thanks to their meditative techniques. While in the capital, Sam was exposed to other types of the beverage and gradually felt more at ease with where he was in the world. He knew for sure that given time, Gendry would obtain the reassurance that he needed, one that was denied to him for most of his life. He might need it, because soon, he'll be in the army.

Kaijin talked about what exactly Gendry will face in the ten weeks of training with the capital garrison: soldiers who came from the low walks of life, instructors who took great pleasure in abusing recruits, and a routine that would challenge a man mentally more than physically.
Gendry tried to say that he's been through all the bad things in life given his bastard status, but Kaijin was quick to correct him. "I know that your body can handle hardship, since you told me that you were a blacksmith. But can you handle those who will call you every insult known to man and even try to make you into an animal? That's the true test of one's character, since endurance is something that not everyone has." Gendry had no answer to that. "Since you have a background in working with metals, I'll make sure that you won't be sent to an infantry brigade."

"Is that a bad thing?" Gendry asked.

"I spent some time in the infantry and they're tough, but the commanders will treat the footmen like shit and it's certainly not filled with the types that you want to around if you have some other skills that the army could use."

"If not the infantry, what else could I do?"

"There is a regiment in the capital garrison whose main responsibilities building roads, bridges, fortifications, and developing new firearms. I trust you know what I mean by 'firearms'?"

"I only have a vague idea," Gendry admitted.

"Sam, if you would please explain to him," Kaijin gestured to him.

Sam spent a few minutes talking about the black powder weapons, which were unlike anything both had seen back in Westeros. Although not even as powerful as dragonfire, black powder could potentially be devastating to those who had to face them.

"I see," Gendry nodded in understanding.

"And in this regiment, I get to hold these black powder weapons?"

"Oh, yes. Not to mention that you get better pay and they actually have to treat you well, since not everyone has the type of abilities needed to handle them."

"You would do that for me, Kaijin?"

"Maybe… I'm just being naïve in doing something good for someone who knows what it is to be in my position and hoping that someone else will do the same for me," Kaijin shrugged.

"I don't think it's naïve. In fact, I think we need more of that in this world," Gendry grinned.

"Hear, hear," Sam raised his teacup, with Kaijin and Gendry clinking theirs with his.

Gendry then talked about what had happened back in Westeros, especially with the conclusion of the War of the Five Kings and the subsequent bond between Joffrey and Margaery Tyrell. Smart move on the part of the Tyrells, Sam thought.

But what really surprised him was that someone tried to poison Joffrey at the wedding, and whoever did only killed Tommen instead. Sam didn't know the younger brother of Joffrey at all, only that he was kinder than his older brother.

"Who would do that? Not that I would wish for Joffrey's health, given what I had heard about him," Kaijin had listened closely.

"When we were in the Free Cities, we heard that Tywin Lannister's son, Tyrion the Imp, was accused and stood trial. But before it began, someone broke him out. No one knows where is,"
Gendry revealed.

Kaijin sighed, immediately detecting political foul play. "You know, no matter our different places in the world, I guess it is in man's lot to kill each other over petty matters. People in court here do that, and people in Westeros do the same thing. Shows we're not so different, sadly."

Gendry was moved by Kaijin's decency and truthfulness. "And those who try to do good end up dead. A cruel world we live in."

As Sam looked around the teahouse in order to get his mind off of the morbid nature of the conversation, his ears picked up a nearby table talking about something about Westeros, mainly the Targaryens. Turning around, he saw a man not much older than he was mouthing off to a lady who looked quite bored but was trying very hard to be polite.

Sam blinked, trying to see if his eyes were mistaken. The woman had slightly tanned skin, but her cheeks and her wide eyes somehow fitted her petite face. Her long black hair was tied in a bun atop her head and he was wearing a red dress that covered her neck but showed the skin between her neck and bosom. Her skin looks so soft.

But besides her thin neck and ears, Sam found himself enamored by her big brown eyes. It added to the attractiveness that she had and had him imagine what her smile would look like.

"Sam?" Gendry noticed that he wasn't paying attention.

"I'm sorry. What?" Sam quickly turned around.

"You seemed distracted," Kaijin said before turning around and seeing who had caught Sam's gaze. "She's beautiful," he nodded in approval.

"You think so?" Sam blurted out.

"Yeah, one of the prettier ones I've seen," Kaijin gave a toothy grin.

Gendry also peeked at the woman. "Maybe you have something better to do, given the girl behind you."

"No, no," Sam tried to brush off. "Let's continue our conversation. I promise not to get distracted again."

"Ah, ah," Kaijin saw through his attempt to avoid the subject. "You want to talk to her, so you better follow through."

"Please leave it alone," Sam was slowly blushing.

"His cheeks are getting red," Kaijin snickered, with Gendry doing the same. He then placed his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Sam, if you do not talk to her, I will do it. Who knows? Maybe she might want to be with me, a prince, over one with white skin."

"Fine," Sam huffed and stood up. "I'll go."

Standing up, he slowly approached the table where the man and the bored woman sat. Tentatively approaching them, they eventually noticed his presence and turned around to face him.

"A white devil. Piss off," the man spat at his feet.

"What did I do to deserve that?" Sam was shocked at the man's immediate hostility.
"You're just another white man who got rejected from where he came from and now is trying to make his way here. What's there to admire?" the man cut right to the chase.

"Hey!" Gendry didn't understand guanhua yet, but he knew what spitting meant. "I might not be of high birth, but I do know what respect is and you should show it."

Unfortunately for the man, he didn't speak the common tongue, causing him to scoff before turning to the lady. "See, this is what I am talking about. The Targaryens could have obtained a new kingdom over those that actually are valuable and can progress, but they chose to rule over white devils, barbarians who continue to live archaically. And here is just another dumb white brute."

Again, Gendry didn't know what he was saying, but he could sense the condescension in his voice. "All right. Do we have a problem here?" he crossed his arms.

The man continued in guanhua, while the woman rolled her eyes. "I know you can't understand me, so I'll just say this. Maybe you could enlighten me on how the dragons easily conquered a backwater land such as Westeros with nothing but fire and how easily they lost it, because they got themselves inbred. You know, your dirt scholars talked about the Targaryen madness and apparently, ruling over a regressive people only made that worse since they didn't receive any challenges and any wars that they lost was because of their incompetence."

Oh, that does it! Sam was not going to stand by and allow this man to insult not only himself, Gendry, and their people, but also Jon's family.

"That would be your conclusion, wouldn't it?" Sam spoke in perfect guanhua while raising his voice, catching the attention of other patrons. "What are you, a low-level official who just completed his examinations? You probably finished reading some histories of Westeros in guanhua, which leave out so much because they are certain words that cannot be translated directly. If you really want to discuss Westerosi history, then let's start with what you said about the Targaryens. What you probably don't realize is that the unflattering things said about them were written by people who lost much because of the dragons, people who felt powerless because they couldn't bond with dragons. I'm guessing you must've read Glydayn's history regarding the Dance of the Dragons, where he went out of his way to criticize Rhaenyra while uplifting Alicent and acknowledging Aegon the Second of His Name as king without talking about him usurping the throne. Then, you're also going to believe that Jaehaerys the Conciator was a great king without realizing that he didn't exactly respect women and didn't enjoy a happy marriage either. Most of the texts that you read have really poor translations, meaning that you don't know anything, which I have to admit is not your fault."

The man was taken aback, surprised that Sam could speak so eloquently in guanhua while the women looked impressed. The patrons continue to listen with interest.

"Well, I'm not saying that all of the Targaryens were incompetent. In fact, Daeron the First of His Name was a great warrior and said that 'You have a dragon—'

Sam immediately knew what he was talking about and wasn't going to let him finish. "You have a dragon. He stands before you.' And you probably were going to add that he said in response to his councilors saying that Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives failed to twice to conquer Dorne and that Daeron had no more dragons. You got that Yandel's The World of Ice and Fire, right? The eighty-seventh page? I read that, too." Sam wasn't letting up. "Was that really your plan tonight? You were going to memorize some pages and say that knowledge was your own? Do you even have any of your own thoughts on Daeron? Or is this what you do? Come to a teahouse, talk to some woman, try to pass yourself off as a man of knowledge when in fact you're a fraud at the most and liar at the least? What's more, you try to insult my companion by implying that he's
ignorant when you try to cover your own hypocrisy?"

The man gulped, stunned by how much Sam was hitting him.

But Sam wasn't finished. "You see, the sad thing about a man like yourself is that by the time you are past the prime in your life, you are going to be doing some thinking and realize that there are two certainties in life. First, don't ever assume that you're better because of what you may think to know. And second, you probably wasted your youth studying for the examinations if you couldn't come up with your own thoughts. That's what kills originality and makes me fear for how knowledge can be misused."

The man glared at Sam, obviously not taking the humiliation well at all. "Maybe. But at least I have potential to rise up the ranks and enter court. Whereas you, a white devil, will always be subordinate to people like me."

Sam groaned. "Better subordinate and actually knowing what I talk about than being in your position and forever ignorant."

The man stood up, as did a few others. "How good are you in a fight, white devil? A fat man like yourself has no chance against us officials, those who have spent years working for our current positions in the empire."

Sam was frankly apprehensive about having to trade blows, and he saw the woman was uneasy.

"That won't be happening on my watch," Kaijin stood up from his table. The young officials immediately recognized the prince and bowed, but he grabbed the man who tried to humiliate Sam and Gendry and slapped him hard on the face. "That's my steward you were speaking to. Apologize to him and his companion."

The official, having been verbally humbled by a white devil and physically humiliated in public, swallowed his pride and bowed before Sam. "Forgive me."


Kaijin pushed the officials out of the teahouse while the patrons resumed their conversations. As for Sam, he sat down across the woman he had glanced at. "I am sorry for… embarrassing your friend."

The woman shook her head. "He was no friend of mine, and I was getting bored anyway. You speak guanhua well."

"It took practice," Sam noticed that Kaijin and Gendry sat back down, listening in on their dialogue.

"I can tell. What's your name?" the woman placed her chin on her knuckles as she rested his arms on the table.

"Samwell Tarly. I'm from Horn Hill in the Reach."

"Pleasure to meet you, Samwell. My name is Meiying Yoon," the woman introduced herself.

"Good to make your acquaintance," Sam beamed.

"You seem very sure on your knowledge of Westerosi history, particularly the dragons. Why is
"You know Prince Daeron Targaryen, the one with the dragon?"

"Of course," she snorted. "Everyone knows about him."

"Well… he's my friend," Sam admitted.

"You're japing with me?" Meiying didn't expect that.

"No. I came to the empire with him." Sam was apprehensive that she would take more interest in Jon than himself.

"So, that's why you sounded very confident. You have a direct source of information from him. Nothing can beat that."

Sam sighed in relief. "Very true, my lady."

Meiying giggled. "You know, it's funny you called me that. Most people would address me like that only after knowing my family."

"It's only good manners to speak to a woman with proper words," Sam replied.

"That's… refreshing to me. People here like to say that they have good manners, but they only really do so when they have something to gain from me," Meiying dismissed.

"Hmmm," Sam concurred. But he then caught what Meiying said. "I'm sorry to pry, but who is your family?"

Meiying sighed. "Right, the important question. My father is Jinlo Yoon, Lord of Tanxun, and my mother is Lady Namyee. But they only got their titles because they paid for it, my father and mother coming from merchants."

"Ah," Sam recognized. "Newly appointed to the nobility, huh?" Meiying nodded.

"Only those with noble blood have last names. Does your family have a lordship also?"

"Yes. I come from an old line, my family producing mostly warriors. But I don't count."

"Because you like books instead of fighting?" Meiying figured out. Sam didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. "My family wants me to learn their business and marry another lordling, but I feel more fulfilled in song and from reading bards."

Sam became instantly elated. "If you have some time, I know some great bards from Westeros that I can introduce to you."

They spent the next few hours talking about the classic songs from the Reach and the other parts of Westeros. Hours passed by before Kaijin tapped on Sam's shoulder and told him that he was going to retire for the night.

"Where do you stay in Yin?" Sam needed to know where he could find Meiying.

"Outside of the walls, near the docks," Meiying answered.

"May I see you again? If you want, I can also invite you to the palace," Sam offered.
"With my full support," Kaijin added.

"Sure. I know where to find you," Meiying walked with Sam out of the teahouse before they had to separate. "It was great to meet you, Samwell Tarly. I hope to see you again soon."

"Likewise," Sam looked longingly at Meiying's elegant back as she got into a litter and returned home.

"Best be careful with her, Sam. You don't want to get hurt," Kaijin told him as they walked back to his palace.

"Why is that?"

"I've heard of her parents. They're willing to do anything to climb their way up. Do you know how they got their lordship?" Sam shook his head. "They helped Prince Yujin with something, something that I don't know about, and the last time I heard, he's looking for a bride."

Sam's blood boiled at the prospect of Meiying being near that unrestrained shit. "Did that happen yet? Their meeting?"

"I don't know," Kaijin admitted. "But I just want to let you know that if you want to pursue her, be ready for some fierce competition."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I rather have her be with you."

At that moment, Sam saw what kind of man Kaijin was, a man who had nothing to gain from helping him but was willing to do it anyway.

"Thank you," Sam said in gratitude.

"And if you need help, just let me know."

"Same here," Gendry put his arm on Sam's shoulder.

It was in Yi-Ti that he found some satisfaction with his life, and now he had met someone who could understand him and never saw him as any less. Sam looked up to the sky and thanked the old gods for his blessings.

Khiara looked across the table at Jon and Arya, who sat with her after accepting her invitation for dinner. There were bowls of rice, plates of various meats and fish, bowls of soup, and other components of a meal fitting an imperial princess. Sensing that Arya didn't know how to properly use hashi, she had one of her maids procure a fork, knife, and spoon from the market.

"I hope you're hungry, Lady Arya," Khiara revealed her knowledge of the common tongue. "I took the liberty of finding dining utensils that you'll be most comfortable with, although you will have to get used to the hashi."

Jon was not surprised that she could speak the common tongue, while Arya was, especially since she spoke with no accent. "Thank you, Your Highness."

After blessing the meal, Khiara and Jon first put rice in their mouths while Arya used her fork and went straight for the pork slices. "Your cousin must have quite the appetite," she noted.
Jon lightly elbowed Arya, which she ignored. "Manners, Arya."

"Pay no heed, Prince Daeron," Khiara brushed it off. "I like it when a lady knows what she wants and has no fear in getting it."

"I'm no lady," Arya grumbled.

"You're not a lady? Well then, I must say you're very pretty for a man, and I can only imagine what the other ladies might think of you," Khiara remarked.

Jon was stumped, not knowing whether she was being serious or was actually jesting with Arya. As for Arya, it took her a moment to absorb her words before lightly chuckling.

"I have to say, that's one of the better japes that I had heard," Arya stuffed her mouth with beef cuts.

"I'm glad. So, how do you like the empire so far, Lady Arya?"

"It's an… interesting place, Your Highness. I've been around a local gang and had to beg on the streets, which was quite different from what I saw in King's Landing."

"I am sure," Khiara affirmed. "Now do tell. What was it like to be among the wretches in this city?"

"To be honest, Your Highness, I was afraid of what might happen to me, since one of the shopkeepers down there forced me and my companions to collect coin for him, with me begging and one of my companions Gendry being one of his collectors."

"I see," Khiara drank her soup. "One of the guards here told me you came here with a thin sword. Is fighting among your natural inclinations?"

"I never saw myself playing the harp or sewing, Your Highness. Many said that I took after my aunt Lyanna, Jon's mother, who also wanted to train with swords," Arya said.

"Yes, I have heard much about the woman who risked it all for love. Can't say that it was a total loss," Khiara looked at Jon, who stared at her back but without emotion.

"Why do you ask, Your Highness?"

"I was just talking with your cousin, or brother if you prefer, about the possibility of having you trained with the Jade Order? Are you aware of them?" Arya shook her head. "Well, the Jade Order is like the kingsguard in Westeros for princesses, but it's made up of only women from noble families and trained in combat arts. There's only so many places that men could go when protecting princesses, so the Jade Order was formed to escort those like me wherever I went."

Arya was immediately interested. There we go, Khiara thought.

"Jon, is that true?" she turned to her brother, who nodded. "Can I train with them? You said that you would let me train with weapons."

"Princess Khiara wanted to invite you here tonight because she wanted to know your decision. Do you really want it?" Jon asked.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" Arya was giddy.

"There's the Arya I know," Jon grinned. "It's your choice."
"Then, I accept. When do I start?

She's an eager one. "I'll let my captain know," Khiara answered before looking at Jon again. What other time could I have this opportunity with the dragon? "So, I hear that you turned down Lord Han's offer for his daughter's hand in marriage."

Jon waved his hand dismissively. "I was quite bored with what he had to offer, which made it all that more difficult to be patient with him."

Ever since Jon was revealed as Daeron Targaryen, the rider of the dragon Meleys, he suddenly became a very eligible bachelor in the empire, if not the most. Lordly families from all over the south came to Yin to offer their daughters' hands in marriage, but Jon turned them all down. Good for him. He knows what he wants.

What really surprised everyone was when Jon turned down an offer to marry the daughter of Lord Nam, who offered to make him the heir to his substantial estates in the southeastern province alongside a staggering dowry of five hundred thousand silver taels. Jon could make that same amount from his princely income after two years, but if he had accepted Lord Nam's offer, he would become a very prominent landowner.

Khiara caught on that Jon didn't intend to stay in the empire permanently, for there was no other reason for him to not accept such a great offer. There was only one motive that she could think of that would cause Jon to leave the empire even though he enjoyed the good life: he was going to return home and take the Iron Throne, which made sense in her mind, but was careful not to reveal that to the emperor. Even though her father recognized Jon's claim to the Iron Throne by making him Prince of Dragonstone, her father still didn't like rival crowns.

Khiara also began to ponder on how Jon would continue the family line, as what was the point of taking the throne if your own blood would not inherit? She was sure that there were suitable ladies back in Westeros who could help him from a political standpoint, but the more she thought about it from that perspective, only one lady stood out: Daenerys Targaryen.

She had heard about what she accomplished in the Slaver's Bay, obtaining an army of Unsullied and taking Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen in quick order. Even though she was a woman, she had a very strong claim to the Iron Throne as a child of Aerys the Mad. Jon might have had a stronger claim than hers since he was the son of the heir and thus Daenerys' elder brother, but such things didn't guarantee a throne.

If she was in Jon's position, she would contemplate marriage to this Daenerys Targaryen so as to end any competition for the throne and their children would inherit both of their parents' claims. What would make this bond most attractive was that Jon and Daenerys both had dragons at their side, meaning that the blood of dragonriders would live on should they have heirs. Not to mention, any children they have would be very attractive on the marriage market, since no one would be stupid enough to reject Valyrian beauties.

However, Khiara surmised that it would be a while before Jon was even in a position to leave and approach his aunt from a position of strength. She decided that she would make the most of the time she had with Jon, maybe prolong his stay, as she wanted to know what being with a dragon was like. It certainly helped that he was a handsome man and still retained the innocent belief in right and wrong despite his recent personal losses. Such men add color to a rather dreary court, even though they may be predictable.

"Jon, how many women did you turn down for their hand?" Arya asked.
"Sixteen," Jon answered.

"Really?" Arya widened her eyes. "Why did you do that? Are none of them pretty enough for you?"

Jon let out a laugh. "No, no. Many of them were, but as you should know, marriage is not something to be taken lightly, especially given the blood we have."

Arya slowly nodded, remembering how Sansa almost ended up marrying Joffrey. "And you think that the fathers of the women who approached had dishonest motives when they proposed marriage?"

"Yes. Meleys is probably the most valuable asset in the empire now and many want their hands on her. That's something that I don't want to happen, since a dragon in the wrong hands can lead to terrible consequences."

"Well said," Khiara agreed. "We only need to look at your Dance of the Dragons to understand what happens when those with nefarious intentions can bond with such creatures. And sadly, your Maegor the Cruel."

"I wouldn't be so judgmental of Maegor Targaryen," Jon spoke. "Yes, he did awful things and yes, no one mourned his death. Those were the same thoughts that I had when I had no connection with the dragons. But since I'm a dragon myself, I had to rethink what I knew about my family. I then realized that those who spoke ill of Maegor were the same people that recognized Aegon as the rightful ruler of the Iron Throne during the Dance when he truthfully usurped it and disrespected King Viserys. Maegor was a great warrior and the son of Visenya Targaryen and his main concern was continuing his line, but how he tried to accomplish that was undeniably wicked. However, if only he had the right woman as his queen to temper his inferno."

Khiara was astounded. "That's an interesting perspective, Prince Daeron, but one that I find to make the most sense out of the texts I had read about him."

"Also, Your Highness, people in Westeros don't like women who could fight and Visenya was one of the greatest warriors the Seven Kingdoms had seen," Arya was excited whenever she talked about her heroine. "Do you really think that they would remember her favorably since she went against what everyone expected of women?"

"No," Khiara shook her head. "You've just touched on how fragile men's egos are and history, unfortunately, is never kind to women who held power since the ones who write it are those who can't comprehend women being any different than carriers for heirs." Arya showed her agreement by bobbing her head. "I take it Visenya Targaryen is a role model of yours?"

"Yes, Your Highness. You have no idea of how happy I was when I saw Dark Sister, her blade," Arya continued to show her glee.

"The more I read about her, the more I began to admire her," Khiara poured tea in Arya's cup. "I myself can't hold a sword since I am not inclined to physical matches of strength, but there are other ways to defend yourself."

"Such as?"

"I'll tell you later, Lady Arya."

Jon, Khiara, and Arya finished dinner and she offered to walk with them back to Jon's palace. Arya walked in front of them and began talking with captain in the Jade Order, who didn't understand the
common tongue but smiled at the young Stark lady's enthusiasm as she showed off what she had learned from Syrio Forel, especially the flips.

Jon and Khiara chuckled at Arya's passion. "This is probably the happiest I had seen from her, ever."

"Why is that?" Khiara inquired as she continued speaking in the common tongue.

"Her mother, Lady Catelyn, was not the most understanding to who she was and wanted her to be a good southern lady rather than a woman of the north."

"I would imagine," Khiara said.

"And the more I think about it, maybe Ned Stark wasn't entirely supportive to what she wanted to do, but not for the reasons many might expect," Jon, for some reason, decided to let his true thoughts come to the open.

"How did he do that?"

"He might have had a Braavosi teach Arya water-dancing, but he did nothing when Catelyn made Arya do sewing and other lady-like pursuits. In another life, he might have been more open to Arya learning the sword, but I can only guess that he was hesitant because my mother was like that people say that Arya took very much after her in every way," Jon revealed with some sadness.

Khiara absorbed his thoughts on Ned Stark, his adoptive father. She had only heard about how honorable the Lord of Winterfell was, which would explain why he was killed so quickly, but this certainly added depths to a man she mostly viewed as simple.

In a tiny way, she wished that her own family was more closely-knit. But her father complicated matters by having two sons with concubines and didn't really put in the effort to secure the family line, as having only one trueborn son led to very dangerous circumstances among those who sought to take advantage of that fact. One of those men was Prime Minister Hudam Shu, who came from a very old southern noble family and also had a weak claim to the Phoenix throne since he was descended from the fourth azure emperor through the female line. The ancestors must hate us, or they wouldn't have cursed us with such shortsightedness from my father, no matter his talents.

Going back to the Stark brood, Khiara now saw a very effective way to Jon and that was his family. She couldn't afford to antagonize him since he had an actual dragon, so instead she would work to ensure that his uncle and his cousin or adoptive sister thrived in the empire. Making her task easier was that Benjen Stark showed great ability as an army commander, so any rise in his position would be counted as merit.

As for Arya, here was a woman who felt so stifled by the customs that she had to grow up with and Khiara could offer her what she longed for after so long: a place where she could fully embrace the fighter in her. It could also make it easier for me to have her at my side while also granting me some protection should Daeron become sour towards me.

"She'll do fine here. I promise you that," Khiara answered.

Jon looked at her curiously. "That's the first time you made a promise from what I hear."

"Incorrect. I only make promises when I intend to fulfill them, and only when I know in my heart that it's the right thing to do," Khiara decided to adopt Jon's belief in right and wrong for the sake of appearance. Or confuse him, since it won't do me any good if he truly understood my intentions.
"Whatever your reasons are… thank you," Jon expressed his appreciation.

"No problem. And if any of your companions need help in any matter, they just need to approach me. Unlike the others at court, I don't discriminate based on the color of one's skin."

"Again, thank you."

"Lady Arya," she called out to her. "I expect you to put in your best effort when you begin your training."

"Only seems fair," Arya replied. *I might like her after all.*

"Well, good night, Prince Daeron. And take care, for there are many watching you and remember who you call on to protect you," she then turned around upon seeing that they had arrived at Jon's palace.

If she had approached Jon with explicit intent, she might not have gotten that close to him. The presence of both Benjen and Arya Stark would make influencing Jon all that easier, because like him, they valued family. *I will need a dragon when I do fight against the Prime Minister's ilk, since it is inevitable.*

As Khiara returned to her own palace, Jon and Arya looked at warily. "Don't trust her, Jon."

"I know," he responded.

"I'm serious. She's everything that Cersei could wish for, but she's many times more beautiful and I can't really tell if she's evil or not. That's what makes it so frustrating for me."

"Maybe," Jon admitted. "But be careful not to think of her as just evil. She did say that she would allow you to train with the Jade Order."

"And I'm grateful, but she wants me close by so that she can get to you."

"At this point, Arya, we need her to protect us."

That, Arya didn't expect. "What?"

"Arya, you just came here. You don't know how precarious my position is, even though I have Meleys. I'm outnumbered and I find myself outmatched by many of those in court, those who commit subterfuge against each other as easily as they breathe. The two main reasons why I was able to last this long was because of Meleys and because of Lord Joon, the man you tried to rob. With the princess protecting us, we can last a long time here."

Arya was stupefied. "What about going back home? You can't stay here forever."

"And I won't," Jon knelt before her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "But if I am to be of any use, I need power. Most importantly, I need an army to take back with me. If I came back to Westeros now, it will not end well for any of us." Arya was slow to understand. "I know it's difficult, but I learned many things from my time here. Sometimes, we have to play the long game if we want to live and make deals with those we know to be slippery."

Arya sighed, but she couldn't deny the cold logic in Jon's words. *What my father should've learned, or else we wouldn't be in this position.* "As I said to you earlier, I trust you."

Jon smiled before kissing her forehead. "Let's rest tonight, for tomorrow will be very busy."
I told you all from the tags that Sam would become a badass, and you don't have to be a warrior to become that. Plus, just watched Good Will Hunting recently and the scene where Matt Damon's character humiliates that prick in the bar was too good to not take some inspiration. Also, Sam would be paired with an OC and I hope I introduced her well (I'm thinking that Jamie Chung would play Meiying Yoon). Plus, Kaijin and Gendry are great wingmen, right?

As for Khiara, she's not a bad person and actually leapt at the chance of helping a strong woman become stronger, but she also found some way to mix some of her own self-serving motives in it. Probably the most complex characters in my mind are ones who can mix in redeeming traits with ulterior reasons, since you can't really tell if you can side with them or not. And given Wu Zetian, how you judge her can go many ways (I personally am one of those who believe that whoever wrote her biography had much to lose with her in power).

I hope that this was a good chapter and we will see what has been happening in Westeros soon enough.
Chapter Notes

Hope you all are continuing to be safe and healthy.

For those wondering when we will see in more detail about the events in Westeros, we’ll see it soon. Just give me some more time, please.

Sandor looked at the note given to him by the Imperial Physician, which came after he had presented the note from Jon, or Prince Daeron as he was called around. Following the directions provided by the Imperial Physician’s assistant, who spoke the common tongue, he was led into a heavily populated area of the capital and towards a large building. Next to the Gongxeng Quarter was a district that had a strong concentration of those knowledgeable in the healing arts, and the assistant was taking him to a place where he could begin to end his dependence on yapian.

Sandor couldn’t understand how such people could live without indulging themselves. There was a greater emphasis on personal discipline in these lands than in Westeros, as those who allowed their desires to control their minds were ostracized. There were even men in the taverns who watched each patron as they drank, and public drunkenness was deemed as an indecency, which carried a sentence of one day in the lockup and a fine of ten silver taels or a week as a chained laborer if unable to pay. Why did I end up here out of all the places in the world, he thought in light despair.

Eventually, they arrived at the place, and the assistant bid him good luck before returning to the palace. Sandor also ignored the stares that came his way, as white devils were not commonly seen in those parts. White devils… couldn’t they have picked a better name that didn’t come from the color of my skin?

Thinking back on Daeron, there was no doubt in his mind that the bastard of Winterfell was a Targaryen, as only those with dragon’s blood could be so comfortable with those creatures. However, being a prince didn’t mean that Jon automatically deserved respect and it will be a long time before Sandor showed any to those who flouted their status in his face. Fuck Joffrey and fuck the Queen. It won’t be long before I say, “Fuck the dragon.”

But the Stark bastard, as he still remained in his mind, was capable of being angry without exploding and he did ask him nicely to get himself sorted out from the yapian. Not wanting to risk arguing with one who could control a dragon, Sandor thought it smart to do just do what he said.

However, Sandor was not looking forward to giving up the yapian. He admitted that the stuff was very potent, and he became more sluggish the more he smoked it. At the same time, drink and the other comforts in Westeros had failed to suppress the hurt and the rage he felt ever since his youth. The memory of his brute brother burning him and causing misery in the household never went away, especially since Gregor had become so favored for raping and murdering Elia Targaryen and the dragonspawn. Well, he didn’t get all of them.

With yapian, he finally found something that allowed him to pass the day without sparing a thought to Gregor or his deeds or the other shits back in King’s Landing and in Westeros. He also was able to ignore his fear of fire, as lighting the yapian pipe was a small price to pay for hours of
comfort.

Vinh, the yapian dealer, told him that he had to be careful who he sold it to. Selling yapian on the underground market yielded lucrative profits, but it was not uncommon for those from the Central Column to disguise themselves as buyers and then catch them in the crime. Yapian dealing was considered a vice and thus carried a heavy prison sentence or even death. That didn’t stop Sandor from grabbing Vinh’s neck and forcing him to hand over the yapian for his use. Eventually, Vinh agreed to sell him after he handed over his coin.

If Sandor didn’t get himself cured of his addiction, Jon would throw him back on the streets and then give him a taste of dragonfire. After seeing how he lived and the quality of the food that he ate, he didn’t want to give up his comforts and so decided to see how far his process would go.

Entering the building, Sandor went through the beaded curtains and saw a man sitting on mat, reading some text in guanhua. Seeing that the man didn’t notice his presence, he cleared his throat.

The man looked up and spoke to him in guanhua, which Sandor didn’t understand. He instead gave him the slip from the Imperial Physician, which the man took from his hand. Nodding, the man gestured for Sandor to follow him and they entered the antechamber, which had several people laid down on other mats while breathing in some incense, which Sandor noted was very strong and he coughed.

The man led Sandor to another room with beaded curtains, which they entered. Inside was a woman with slightly tanned skin, but she had a well-defined jawline, firm cheekbones, large lips and nose, and wide eyes. She also had wavy black hair and not too large bosoms, which was obvious from her white robes underneath a red coat. *She looks very good, got to give her that,* Sandor observed.

The man and woman spoke to each other in guanhua, with the woman nodding before the man patted Sandor’s shoulder and left him with the woman.

“You’re from Westeros?” she surprised him by speaking the common tongue.

“Yes. I was told by Prince Daeron to stop being an addict,” Sandor cut to the chase.

“Right, the dragon,” she recognized. “If you would please sit down.” For some reason, Sandor followed her instruction even though he rarely followed others’. “Some tea?”

“No.”

“Okay, you seem to be a man who doesn’t care about the consequences of his actions or has little, if any respect, for common courtesy,” the woman bluntly stated. “At the same time, I think that can work to my advantage.”

“How so?” Sandor inquired.

“It means that you won’t keep any secrets regarding your physical health, if you’re even capable of lying about it. Usually, those who become addicted to yapian do so because they’re trying to cope with a much deeper problem, something that they want to hide from others. Not that I blame them for doing so, but it doesn’t excuse them for adopting self-destructive behavior,” the woman explained.

“How is me smoking yapian self-destructive?”

The woman turned around, opened her drawer, and pulled out a glass cylinder containing what
looked like a liver, despite the bumps on it.

“Is that a liver?”

“Yes, which belonged to a man who departed early from this world because he couldn’t control yapian addiction. Over time, yapian will damage the vital organs in a person, including the heart, the lungs, the liver, and even your ability to produce seed.”

“What?” Sandor was confused.

“Right, this is the part that confuses most people. Every part of the body is connected to each other, and the body cannot function if one of its parts is faulty. It’s all part of balance and an imbalance in one area of the body will affect the rest. In the instance of yapian, its ability to adversely affect the heart and liver will lead to many problems when it comes to seeds, and you might not be able to get your cock up when you’re with a woman,” the woman continued.

Sandor never thought about it that way.

“Eventually, too much yapian use will affect your mind,” she placed her finger on her temple. “You will be tired more often, you won’t remember things, and you will be in a severe state of confusion among other effects. They’re all connected, and every part of the body needs each other to keep going.”

“Regarding the mind, maybe I don’t want to remember things,” Sandor answered.

“And that’s one of the things that we will do. Every day, we will have you go through our treatments that range from potions to meditation and even helping you cope with your physical ailments in a healthy manner. On top of that, we will devote one hour every day discussing your past and maybe discovering what could be done to help you—”

Sandor stood up, immediately fearful of divulging his personal details to someone he didn’t know. “I think… I came to the wrong place.”

“No,” she shook her head. “According to the slip from the Imperial Physician, you are in the right place. But I also understand your concern, which is natural? I mean, who am I to you and what did I do to deserve knowing what happened in your life?”

Sandor blinked, surprised at how well she read his mind, and sat back down.

“No matter how many potions I give you and what I do to help you to handle yourself physically, those will only deal with the surface of the problem. As I keep saying, everything is connected and I believe that besides the heart, the most important part of the body is the mind, as how we treat our bodies is dependent on our mental state. Because truth be told, your addiction to yapian is only a symptom.”

“Why do you care so much about me?” This was the first time Sandor had heard anyone talk about his health and thus display concern for him.

“You misunderstand. I’m a physician and my first priority is ensuring that my patients are healthy, and the first step towards that is to make them feel secure and unafraid. There is no guarantee that what I have to offer will heal you, but you can never know if you don’t try. But most importantly, it seems that you don’t have much a choice in the matter since any note carrying the Imperial Physician’s seal means that the treatment is mandated.”

Sandor sighed. “And if I don’t respond well?”
Then, I’ll just send you to another place.”

“I just want to warn you that if I do this, be prepared for some messed up shit. And I don’t like fire.”

“I’ll keep those in mind,” the woman nodded. “You sure you don’t want tea? It’s also part of the process.”

Sandor picked up the cup and held it out, with the woman pouring. “May I ask your name?”

“No names. At least not yet,” the woman said. “And I know who to ask to pay for the costs, as I don’t come cheap. I’ll just call you the ‘big white man’ for now.”

Sandor chuckled, which came as a surprise to both of them. “Then, I guess I’ll just call you the dragon lady, since you came onto me very firmly.”

Both laughed. “Dragon lady… never heard that.”

Arya rubbed her forearms and shins, bruises forming from how much she struck the wooden dummy. The dummy had three arms and one leg, which represented an opponent’s body in various positions and the lines of force the body can give out. Underneath the dummy were wooden slates that had a springiness, which was similar to the involuntary reaction of an opponent to strikes and allowed the practitioner to train how to absorb energy into their stance. Why was I so happy to join?

Arya had to find her way to the Jade Order pavilion, as Jon and Sam had to go to work and Benjen had to return to his headquarters deep in the jungle. She started the day learning the tongues and culture of Yi-Ti alongside Gendry and Sandor. Afterwards, Gendry would report for training with the army and Sandor would go to the physician in the city. So, she used her limited knowledge of guanhua to ask for directions, although she was admittedly a little embarrassed about her speech sounding so choppy.

Eventually, she came to a pavilion with a wide courtyard, which had women drilling with weapons and their hands and feet. She walked to the pavilion, ignoring the stares that the others gave her, and went towards the entrance. Upon opening the screen doors, she saw a woman sitting on a mat while playing with what looked like a stringed instrument. It gave off a similar sound to the fiddle, but it seemed to go longer and rang more calmly in her ear.

As for the woman, she had a small face, black hair tied back, lips and nose that fit her face, and focused eyes. But upon closer look, Arya could see that her eyes weren’t looking at anything and was playing the fiddle-like instrument with such concentration. Is she… blind?

“Hello,” Arya spoke in guanhua.

“Do you seek the Jade Order?” she asked in guanhua.

“I do,” Arya nodded. “May I ask who you are?”

The woman set her instrument down and walked towards Arya. It became clearer that she was blind, but Arya didn’t say anything. “I am Gong-Er. I can take you to where you need to be, but first, I must apologize,” she dipped her head in respect.

“Apologize?” Arya asked, stumped.
“For this.” Suddenly, Gong-Er attacked Arya, her hands and feet striking seemingly all at once.

Acting quickly, Arya dodged her attacks and jumped backwards, just avoiding her kicks. Despite being blind, Gong-Er knew where Arya was and tried to strike her with a hand slice. Remembering what Syrio taught her, she flipped backwards and kept her distance. Where’s a sword? I need a sword!

Gong-Er was persistent, as she used her legs in a rapid fashion and kept closing the distance with Arya. Seeing that there was no way she could avoid her, Arya punched her face as hard as she could, but that only caused her to fall down on the floor and jump right back up.

Gong-Er spun around before jumping, her feet colliding Arya’s chest and making her crash into the screen walls. When Gong-Er got close again, she tried to hit her with as many punches as she could, but she was too quick.

“You are skilled, but this is no dance,” Gong-Er then forced her hands away and pushed against Arya hard, her back crashing into the screen walls again.

Thinking quickly, Arya ran straight for the instrument, with Gong-Er in hot pursuit. After grabbing it, she raised it to strike at Gong-Er. But then, she stopped in her tracks and raised her hand.

“Good,” she said. “You have some idea of adaptation, improvisation. You saw that you couldn’t beat me, so you used what you could find. That’s a good start.”

Arya raised her eyebrows while giving Gong-Er her instrument back. “What was that for?”

“Princess Khiara has many enemies. I had to be sure.”

“Of what?”

“That you were not an assassin,” Gong-Er circled around her.

“Um,” Arya struggled to find the words, as her knowledge of guanhua was limited. “You… could… have… asked.”

“No,” Gong-Er shook her head. “You do not truly know someone until you them. Now, come. Sit down.”

Arya obeyed, sitting across from Gong-Er as she resumed playing music. “You… very… good.”

Gong-Er smiled. “I was already good before I lost my sight, but I didn’t allow that to limit what I could do.”

“May… I… ask… what… happened?”

“Black powder. Someone sabotaged our black powder storage and I tried to stop it from going off, but it did and the last thing I remembered was the storage burning before my sight faded,” Gong-Er revealed.

“I… am—” Arya started, but Gong-Er shook her head.

“Don’t feel sorry. It’s just an inconvenience and my lack of sight made me appreciate the world of the living, as there were things I couldn’t have touched and sounds I couldn’t have heard if I could see clearly. We must see the good in everything, or we’ll suffer forever,” Gong-Er answered.

*Good in everything… how am I supposed to see the good from my father dying?*
“I can sense conflict in you, whatever your name is.”

“My name is—”

“No, your name is not important. Why have you come here?”

“To… learn… how… to… fight,” Arya said with enthusiasm.

“Ah, you want to fight people. That means you want to hurt those that wronged you, right?” Gong-Er continued playing.

“Yes.”

“And not because you want to protect Princess Khiara?”

“I… don’t… know… her… well.”

Gong-Er stopped playing, surprised at her answer. “Where are you from?”

“Westeros. The northern kingdom,” Arya answered.

“I see,” Gong-Er suddenly spoke the common tongue.

“How do you know the common tongue?” Arya was becoming more startled at this strange woman also knowing how to talk to her.

“It was probably the only way that I could talk to those that came from the west of the Jade Gates. That, and High Valyrian. You’re not the only white devil that managed to come here. But I’m curious. Why did you leave Westeros?”

Arya exhaled, hesitant to reveal what had happened ever since she left Winterfell.

“You’re a fugitive,” Gong-Er guessed.

“It’s complicated,” Arya replied.

“We have time. Tell me your story.”

Arya spent the next few moments explaining her life at Winterfell, her time in King’s Landing, witnessing her father unjustly executed by Joffrey, her brother and mother butchered by traitors, and how she was on the run.

“I can’t say that you aren’t justified in having hate, rage, and anger against those that wronged you. Contrary to what many people might believe, anger can be useful, but only if you don’t allow it to become your only reason for existing,” Gong-Er said.

“How so?” Arya crossed her arms.

“Correct me if I’m wrong. From how detailed your account is, you must have a list in your mind of the people you want to kill. The people you want to kill gives you purpose, helps you keep going through every hardship, and helps you stay focused. Am I wrong?”

Arya gulped. How did she know?

“But allow me to ask this. If you kill everyone on your list, what will you do afterwards?”
Arya was taken aback. She had never thought that far, as the thought of killing Joffrey and the others had been the sole focus of her mind. “I don’t know,” Arya admitted.

“And that’s the problem with revenge, as that only gives you a short-term purpose but not one that can keep you going even if you accomplish all of your goals. I’m sorry to say this, but as unfair as your hardships have been, the world went on while your father died. It’s difficult to accept that, but it’s the truth. No one cares.”

Arya grounded her teeth at how cold and dismissive Gong-Er sounded.

“If you want to fight and hurt people, you must first learn how to live peacefully and learn how to heal yourself and others. To do both is much more difficult than hurting, as there’s a certain strength from healing that those who relish killing can never have,” Gong-Er continued.

Arya blinked. “How can those who heal be stronger than those who kill?”

“Do you remember how quickly you wanted to kill this Joffrey for killing your father? That is usually the response we have whenever someone wronged us, but as I said, life went on.”

“So… you’re implying that I should learn how to heal even my enemies?” Arya was close to scoffing.

“No. I’m saying that you must have a purpose larger than yourself to live with and you must learn how to attend to your spirit before you think about ending another’s life. Those who killed your father only know to take life, so they’re already weak.”

Why is this so confusing? Arya rubbed her forehead.

“I have trained countless women, those who wish to join the Jade Order, but only one in ten managed to complete my training. Do you wish to know why?” Arya continued to listen. “It’s because many times, those who wanted to join the Order only did so out of vanity, a way to escape the confines of their families who wanted a future that they didn’t want to be part of. Other times, those who come here have too much expectations and expect the Order to be filled with those who practice straight moral lives, but the world is rarely kind to those sorts. Especially women, because no one expects us to have strength.”

Gong-Er swiftly put her hand on Arya’s face, tracing her eyes, her cheeks, her nose, and her chin. “You have fine features, but I can sense a dimness in you. Of the Maiden-Made-of-Light and the Lion of Night, you seem to have more of the latter inside. Without the Maiden, you will perish, for an imbalance between the two can lead to terrible consequences.” Gong-Er resumed playing on her instrument. “This is called an erhu, quite common in the music of the empire. But this allows one to really feel the emotions when included in song.”

“When will we begin training?” Arya was growing impatient.

“Soon, after I explain to you what you will face. You know how to flip, but we can teach you how to overcome any obstacle. You know how to improvise, but we can teach you techniques where any object can become a weapon. You have quick instincts, but we can teach you how to kill with the simplest of tools and without thinking. You will be taught how to use a sword, a bow, spear, and how to handle black powder weapons. You will learn hundreds of ways of killing,” Gong-Er continued to strum.

Now, we’re talking.

“But… your time learning how to kill will be balanced by learning how to appreciate life. You will
be taught how to write poems, calligraphy, play music, and dance properly.” Arya groaned. “I know what you’re thinking, but a woman who only knows how to fight and dresses like a man will be detected easily. However, a woman who can kill and at the same time still retain her appearance in a dress will be unstoppable, as no one will expect such a person to be so deadly.”

“So… I should wear a dress then?” Arya almost choked on those words.

“Only when you have to,” then Gong-Er finished whatever song she was playing on the erhu. “Let’s begin with strikes. As I said, you are skilled and have some combat training. Let’s see what else you know.”

Arya had been training with Gong-Er for the last week, and the soreness that resulted from her intense regime didn’t cease. Gong-Er made her body move in ways that she never thought was possible, and bruises formed on her legs and arms from constantly striking solid surfaces. The wooden dummy was just the latest one she used.

Meanwhile, besides her morning lessons with the tutor Jon hired, she learned how to write elegant calligraphy, playing instruments, and dancing. The type of dancing that Gong-Er made her learn was also quite strenuous, as she had to perform elaborate moves over two hours at most.

Before the week was over, Gong-Er took her to a slaughterhouse, where the butcher had just dressed a cow. A strong stench hung in the air, nothing that Arya wasn’t used to.

“Hit it,” Gong-Er pointed to the cow carcass.

“You want to me to hit it?” Arya was baffled.

“I’m testing something new. I wonder what would be more effective when it comes to learning how to fight: using dummies or using actual flesh and bone. Help me figure that out.”

Arya exhaled, preparing herself. She threw a punch at the cow carcass, but she flinched upon discovering how hard it actually was and rubbed her knuckles. “What in the Seven Hells?”

Gong-Er paid the butcher some silver taels to leave the slaughterhouse to them for the rest of the day. She also turned to leave. “Keep practicing.”

“Wait a moment. Where are you going?”

“To get food. Don’t worry, I’ll get something for you also.”

“What will you get?”

“There’s a noodle place not far from here, if I remember correctly. I’ll be back,” and Gong-Er left the slaughterhouse.

Arya groaned, but continued striking against the dead cow’s flesh. The bruises didn’t make it easier, as she winced every time she punched and kicked.

But the more she struck, the more she began to be accustomed to it. Eventually, Arya imagined Joffrey in the place of the cow carcass, the memory of how she fought the vicious idiot on the Trident still very fresh. It pained her to have Nymeria separated from her, but Cersei wanted blood and just settled for Lady.

Remembering the very people that had a direct effect on her life made Arya strike the dead cow harder and faster. The amount of rage and hate that she had against those that wronged her and her
family had finally found an outlet, and she wasn’t going to stop until all of it had been released from her body.

What started out as hesitation against hitting flesh and bone transformed into an eagerness to know what it felt like to hurt people. The Hound did it, the Mountain did it, and I shall soon do it.

Eventually, Arya got tired and fell on her bottom before taking in heavy breaths. She looked at her fists, which became more bruised, and felt her legs, grimacing at how tender they felt.

The slaughterhouse door opened, with Gong-Er entering with two steaming bowls. “I’m back.” She sat next to Arya and handed her a bowl. “Be careful. It’s hot.”

Arya needed more time to become accustomed to the hashi, but she was much better with it than before and readily stuffed the noodles in her mouth. Slurping them in, she found herself enjoying the texture, the shredded chicken, and the broth’s warmness.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Gong-Er caught on.

“Mmmhmm,” Arya was too busy consuming one of her new favorite dishes.

“Yeah. One of the things that I grew to appreciate after becoming blind was that I still had my other senses. Imagine not being able to taste good food. I would have lost my mind there.”

“For some reason, no matter how much I eat, I just don’t grow,” Arya swallowed some chicken.

“Be thankful for that. Taller people usually have a more difficult time doing all of the elaborate exercises we’ve been going over.”

“Like Princess Khiara?” Studying what the Lengii were, it didn’t surprise her that Khiara was very tall, even though she was only half-Lengii.

“Her Highness has many skills, but wielding weapons is not one of them. Still, she’s not someone to be trifled with.”

“So, you know that she’s dangerous.”

“I might not have my sight, but I am not blind. You cross her, she will make you disappear. What worries me so much is that she is never angry or vindictive. There are times where I think that she doesn’t have any emotions at all and is very indifferent whenever something terrible happens.”

“I would expect her to be.”

“But at the same time, she will never abuse those who serve her and will never allow greed rule her actions. That, I believe, makes her so frightening, because she is concerned about the common good but is not above killing innocent people to get what she wants.”

“How would you know that?” Arya asked curiously.

“There was a rumor going around the palace, concerning one of the emperor’s concubines. That concubine gave birth to a son, the emperor’s third male child before Prince Sumeng was born. But the abundance of sons born to different mothers would lead to a lot of competition for the throne, and Yujin and Kaijin were slowly growing when that boy was born. No one wanted to return to the evil days of war over the phoenix throne, so imagine everyone’s relief when that boy was found dead and Prince Sumeng finally entered the world.”
“How is this related to Princess Khiara?”

“Some courtiers believe that the emperor’s Lengii consort wanted to eliminate that child, and that she had Khiara do her dirty work. I knew the empress while she was still alive before succumbing to disease and how close she and Her Highness were to each other, so ordering a child to be killed so that her trueborn son could inherit the throne was something she would do.”

Arya’s eyes widened, disturbed by that prospect. “And you believe it?”

“I don’t know if it’s true, but it is very possible. And Her Highness is very much like her mother. In addition, it’s no secret that the rest of the family do not consider Prince Sumeng adept at politics and war, but there’s a precedent and no one is going to risk another succession crisis.”

Arya processed what Gong-Er said about Khiara. She shouldn’t have been shocked, as she figured that Joffrey didn’t blink when he ordered all of Robert’s bastards killed and especially since Tywin most likely was complicit in murdering the Targaryen babes born of Elia. However, it bothered her because she had difficulty in reconciling the likelihood of her being a killer of children with how open-handed she was to herself.

“I might have told Jon to be careful of her, but still…”

“Why are you still in the Jade Order, protecting her, if you knew all of this?” Arya had to know.

“Because even though I know how much of a threat she can be, I am indebted to her. I have no family, and no one would take a blind woman into their service, but she did. And a small part of me is hoping that Princess Khiara is more than what she wants to reveal to others, because I can no other reason why she would keep me on despite my skill. Then again, hope is rarely useful in describing people who have much to lose and much to gain in power plays.”

Arya sighed, seeing how conflicted her teacher was. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“You told me your story. It’s only right that I tell you mine,” Gong-Er shrugged. Arya chuckled as they both finished their noodles.

Walking back to the palace and calling it a day, Arya walked back to Jon’s palace and looked forward to the next day with Gong-Er.

“Hey, white girl!” Arya turned around and saw Prince Yujin and a couple of men moving towards her.

She had heard about Prince Yujin, particularly how he was abusive to his servants and how he engaged in wanton behavior towards any perceived slights. She also heard that he was a dangerous fighter, very willing to break the rules and cheat in order to win. He’s Joffrey, but he knows how to fight and doesn’t need to whine to be threatening.

Arya continued to walk, not wishing to interact with Yujin. But he would not be denied, as the two men with him grabbed onto her and pushed her against the wall. They were much stronger than she was, and her limbs needed more time to be adjusted to the training Gong-Er was putting her through.

But she remained calm as Yujin looked down into her eyes. He talked to the one of them, who said in the common tongue, “When His Highness talks to you, you best listen.”

“Is this his idea of talking?”

“Shut up!” the man said before he translated Yujin’s words. “He said, ‘I hear you were a beggar in the streets, working for a man who ran a meat bun shop. And that one of your companions is an
Arya narrowed her eyes. “How would you know that?”

“I have connections with the less desirable sects of this city, and they are not pleased that one of their earners has been taken away from them. They want compensation,” the man said for Yujin.

“That is not my problem, and they can go fuck themselves,” Arya spat.

Yujin laughed in amusement. “He said that you have spirit, but you have no sense of gratitude. Is this how you behave when it comes to those that fed you and kept you hidden from prying eyes?”

“They did nothing to help me. Don’t get the facts confused,” Arya told Yujin.

“He said that maybe he should bring up this matter to your cousin, Prince Daeron. After all, he has enough money to pay whatever the shopkeeper and his bosses want.”

“He will never do that. Why do you even care for scum like the shopkeeper?”

Yujin groaned. “It’s a simple concept, one that even your ignorant mind would understand. They help me, I help them. You don’t need to know how. Right now, I have an obligation to answer their needs. Tell me, how will you compensate the shopkeeper for all that he’s done for you?”

Arya spit in Yujin’s face. “That’s my compensation.”

Yujin scoffed while wiping his cheek before kneeling Arya hard in the stomach, causing her to fall over and struggle for breath. She then felt her hair grabbed.

“Maybe I should take it out of your flesh,” Yujin held a knife near her eye. “Blood is as good as coin to those wretches in the streets. Shall we cut away your ear or your nose?”

“My cousin will kill you for this,” Arya managed.

“We’ll see about that,” Yujin was about to penetrate her skin with his knife before they all heard a dragon roar.

Turning to see the courtyard, they saw Meleys on all four of her limbs, growling at Yujin. The men were immediately frightened and ran off, leaving Yujin to face the Red Queen reborn and Jon, who was storming towards him from another part of the courtyard.

Arya pushed away Yujin before running to Jon, hugging him tightly as she sought his protection.

“Aren’t you all right?” Jon asked.

“I’m fine,” Arya said. She also felt Ghost lick her hand.

“Protect her, boy,” Jon told his direwolf before glaring at Yujin. “You put your hands on her,” he snarled.

“What do you expect me to do after she spat in my face?” Yujin sneered.

“She would only do so if she had good reason. Why did you touch her?”

“She has a debt to pay, your cousin.”

“Well, she’s not going to pay it, especially if it’s related to the likes of you.”
“That’ll be unwise of her to do so, and of you to refuse it on her behalf. Who knows what might happen to you if she walks the streets of this city again?”

“Is that a threat, Prince Yujin?” Jon pushed his jacket back to reveal Dark Sister.

“I’m saying, there are people who she owes her life to when she was just another white devil and those people are not as restrained as I am when it comes to retribution,” Yujin explained.

“Which isn’t saying much about yourself.”

Yujin stepped menacingly towards Jon. “If only you didn’t have your fucking dragon, I would gladly slice open your chest and drain you of all of your blood.”

“What’s stopping you, you son of a bitch?”

Yujin’s face twisted in anger and his hand was on the pommel of his katana, very tempted to unsheathe it. However, both Ghost and Meleys glaring at him stopped him from meeting an early death and he willed himself to calm down.

“You will pay, bastard. You will pay,” he snarled before storming off.

“I will be waiting,” Jon called out before rubbing Ghost’s neck and scratching Meley’s snout. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Arya’s breathing was back to normal as she rubbed her belly. “That shit.”

“He’ll get his. I am not letting this go, not after what he did to you,” Jon promised. “But tell me. What did he mean by ‘debt?’”

Arya cleared her throat. “I’m hungry. I’ll tell you over dinner.”

Jon nodded. “Okay. I need to know everything, so that I can help you.”

“Don’t worry,” Arya gave him a small smile.

Mingyu presented her pass to the guard. “What’s your business here?” he asked.

“I have a commission from General Lin to perform before your troops. Here is the receipt that confirms payment from the quartermaster,” she pulled out another piece of paper.

The guard looked over the slips before handing them back to her. “All right. Go on now.”

A few weeks ago, General Lin, the adjutant of the Capital Field Army at Si Qo, hired Mingyu for a performing job. He had much about her abilities on the koto and as a singer, so he thought that she would be able to bring some comfort to the troops who were stationed deep in the jungle. There might have been settlements at Si Qo where they could accommodate their families, but the jungle was rarely kind to any outsiders.

At least, that was what others were led to believe if they asked. In reality, she was hired to do another job, one that she was undertaking on behalf of a group of men who had much to lose from the actions of one man: Benjen Stark.

The group of men, which consisted of merchants, bureaucrats, and army officers, were alarmed when Daeron Targaryen started to investigate the “disappeared” brigades. There was much money to made from the selling off the supplies of those brigades and siphoning off the payroll to their
own pockets. The merchants would sell the supplies on the market, the army officers would provide them for a cut, and the bureaucrats had to forge the paperwork and reroute the payroll. The operation got so big and profitable that certain officials at court also got involved for a piece. The northern armies could defend the empire on land and the fleet could defend the empire from the seas, so they thought, “Why not make some profit from the southern armies?”

But Daeron Targaryen had to put his nose in where it didn’t belong and threaten their livelihood. Daeron didn’t play by the rules, so there was no bribing him. His uncle, Lieutenant General Benjen Stark, was like that, and his position as commander of the Capital Field Army really put their schemes in jeopardy since he had direct access to one of their most valuable sources of income. His nephew alerted him, and he thus had the quartermaster do his own investigation.

What Benjen Stark didn’t know was that the quartermaster was involved and thus sent a warning to the group. Too much was at stake for two white devils to simply ruin everything, so they got into contact with someone that came highly recommended by those from the criminal underworld, which was herself.

As a fugitive from imperial justice and a former member of the Jade Order, Mingyu found herself among a clan of shinobi, who trained her in the secret arts. Now, she lived contract after contract, being able to survive while remaining hidden from imperial commissioners. The group paid her clan handsomely if they sent in someone to monitor and possibly eliminate Benjen Stark should he come too close to the truth. *Nothing I can’t handle.*

In fact, this Benjen Stark wasn’t the first army officer she was hired to kill. To her, it was just business and she learned long ago to disconnect her feelings from those she had to kill. Also, no one cared to listen to her before she had to run, as she was a merely a soldier trying to go up against those more powerful than she was. *What’s one more body to add on it?*

Settling down in her room, Mingyu was scheduled to perform the next day. However, she would use the night to begin her surveillance of her target. Changing from her bright silk robes to her dark shinobi dress, she snuck out of her quarters, avoided being seen by the guards, and ran alongside rooftop after climbing onto it.

Remembering how army compounds were arranged, she was able to find her way to the commander’s quarters. Finding some bushes to hide in, she jumped in and slid open the screen doors, but only by a little bit in order to not alert her target.

Peeking in, she found the white devil, Benjen Stark, reading through some text about the empire’s military history, particularly the maroon dynasty. Looking through the room, she found only books, his armor, a table, and tea set. That baffled her, as most men in his position would use their post to enrich themselves by purchasing rich decorations and even finding female company. But not him. *And his nephew is a prince, so either his nephew is being a miser, or he doesn’t ask.*

Mingyu heard Benjen read aloud in impeccable nihongo. It wasn’t perfect, but very good considering how much time he spent in the empire and how far he had climbed. That told much about his attitude, which was very different from the other army officers she encountered.

But what’s more, Benjen looked very good for his age. He had a trimmed beard, hair tied in a bun, and was well-built. He also had pale skin and certain ruggedness about him that told her that he had seen much in his life. Most generals had grown fat, let their pleasures get the better of them, and allowed others to become indulgent. From what she heard, Benjen ran the army like a tight ship and no one was allowed to slack off.

Usually, Mingyu would think that Benjen was being idealistic, but upon seeing him, she saw that
there was more to him. And that made her… curious.

She didn’t know much about Benjen Stark, but the good thing about her contract was there was no deadline. She could then learn more about her target, and thus see whether he was fit to live a longer life.

*It would be a shame if I carried out my contract without seeing what kind of man he really is.*

Making her way back to her quarters without being noticed, she prepared her instruments and prepared her voice. She also thought about how she would focus her attention on Benjen, the one that had sparked her interest. *They gave me leeway on how to do it, so might as well take advantage of it.*

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking that Lucy Liu plays the physician that Sandor has to visit, Zhang Ziyi plays Gong-Er, and Jing Tian plays Mingyu. And Gong-Er's intro was based on Seraph's intro in Matrix Reloaded.

Sandor is being treated at essentially rehab, Arya is training with the Jade Order, and Benjen is now being targeted. I hope I handled Gong-Er's conversation with Arya well, being a good teacher and all. But now, Jon has a personal reason to fight Yujin, as no one can get away with hurting his family.

As for Mingyu, we'll see more of her background and why she is a fugitive, including how much time she spends watching Benjen.

Looks like Jon's snooping around led to serious consequences. Here's to them surviving and beating the corrupt men who wish them harm.
"All we need is a spark"

Chapter Notes

I hope you are all safe and healthy.

A few surprises in this chapter, so buckle up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lord Joon walked with Lord Buko, the commander of the capital garrison, as they inspected the training grounds. Even though he was still the Governor of the Northwest Province and Field Marshal of the Northwest Army, he was relegated to carrying out his duties from the capital since he carried the additional title of Master of the Horse. He found it quite difficult to ensure that the chain of command continued in his absence, as the day-to-day affairs fell on the shoulders of Quartermaster Shin and Adjutant Dae.

Regarding the governance of the province, Lord Joon made sure to give clear guidelines to his son Seong on how to govern from Kushiro. He didn’t tell him exactly what he needed to do, but he gave him a framework from which he could make his own decisions. It was as Prince Sumeng said. He needed to learn how to rule in my place if he was to become the next governor.

Adding to his difficulties was his attempting juggling with the various factions at court. Admiral Okamoto and the ones siding with Princess Khiara had appreciated how he handled the situation with Prince Sumeng after his disastrous defeat at the hands of the Jogos Nhai, but he needed to make sure that he didn’t paint a target on his back for the Prime Minister and his faction, which included the Economics Minister. At the same time, he found that it was impossible to try to remain neutral forever, especially since those aligned with the Prime Minister didn’t like the fact that it was himself that sheltered the white devils.

Daeron, why did you have to make things difficult for me? he thought in reference to Jon’s refusing to pay for the privilege. He couldn’t deny that he wouldn’t have progressed this much if it weren’t for the Prince of Dragonstone, but because he decided to show that he was above all of the schemers, he made too many enemies to count. The only reason why he was still alive was because Princess Khiara took a shine to him, and that caused her faction to protect him also.

But even more disturbing that the regular plots at court, Joon found that there was a dangerous force growing amongst the army officers. The fact that many southern army commanders were in the Prime Minister’s pocket and were in league with the merchants was not something new, but Lord Joon found that for those not in the prime minister’s grasp, they had become much more willing in expressing their dissatisfaction with the rigidities of the imperial court and bureaucracy. A few of them were entertaining the idea of an overthrow of all “villainous” sorts from the court and placing all power on the emperor and a few men who could “right the wrongs of the empire.”

One such person was Lord Buko. He initially thought of him as another crony to the Prime Minister, but Joon soon discovered that his relationship with the second most powerful official in the empire was just a façade. In fact, Lord Buko had expressed on more than one occasion that he had grown tired of the court and bureaucrats and was disturbed at how much money was circulating amongst the officials.
“My lord, be very careful not to say that in public,” Joon warned him. “That is treasonous talk.”

“Who is committing the bigger treason, Lord Joon? The ones who have to follow orders, no matter what they are, or the ones who are supposed to run this country but only do so if they have something to gain?” Lord Buko shot back.

“My lord, I have my own misgivings about what is happening now, but you’re implying something that will not change anything. If the Prime Minister is eliminated, someone else will take his place. It’s better if we have someone in court who we both know how to handle than someone else who can be very unpredictable,” Joon pointed out.

“Is that how you’re going about it? Being passive?” Lord Buko narrowed his eyes.

“Whatever I do, I do for my family. As long as they are alive, I won’t support radical moves,” Joon made clear.

Lord Buko nodded, disappointed but understanding. “Perhaps one day, you’ll see things for what they are and that you have to do something to change it. I hope you make the right decision when the time comes.”

Lord Joon was very concerned about what he meant by that, but he kept his mouth shut.

Going back to the training yards, Lord Joon came across one of the recruits in the front row. Despite the bruises in his face and cut lip, he recognized the recruit as Gendry. “How is he doing?” he addressed the senior trainer.

“He’s very strong, my lord,” the trainer answered sharply. “He might be a white devil, but throw any insult at him and he’ll just take it.”

“What happened to his face?” Joon examined him.

“Training accident,” the trainer replied simply. “We were instructing him on how to fight and he kicked one of the other recruits in the balls. It went as you would imagine.”

“Indeed,” Joon acknowledged. “How far has he gone with his training?”

“Four more weeks, my lord.”

Joon bobbed his head. “So, you are a distant relation to Daeron, even though you’re a bastard,” he spoke in the common tongue, not trusting that he could speak any of the tongues well.

“Yes… field marshal,” Gendry attempted in nihongo, causing some snickers from the other recruits.

“Speak the common tongue, boy. You’re embarrassing yourself, and don’t speak the other tongues until you can speak without mumbling,” Joon commanded.

“I am trying my best, field marshal,” Gendry said.

“Don’t try. Just do.” Unlike with Daeron, Lord Joon had no intention of being soft on him. He might have a few drops of dragon blood in him, but he is nothing to me. He must make himself into something.

“Yes, field marshal.”

“Am I correct in assuming that you will take the examinations after your training is done?”
“Yes, field marshal. After some preparations.”

“If you pass, anything you do will be on you. If you rise, that’s because of you. If you fall, that’s because of you. It won’t change even if you go into the post Prince Kaijin promised you.”

Gendry sighed before nodding. “Understood, field marshal.”

“Carry on,” Lord Joon moved on with Lord Buko.

Lord Joon was then invited to dine with the Minister of War later that day. He had only met him once after arriving in Yin, but he was apprehensive about what would happen. He couldn’t get tell whose side he was on, but he seemed to be more aligned with Princess Khiara due to his proximity with Admiral Okamoto.

Arriving at the Minister of War’s residence, he was led into his main quarters, where a large table decorated with various dishes was already waiting for him. Behind the table was the Minister of War himself, Wendi Zong.

The Zongs were not the most powerful family in the empire, but they played a pivotal role in the rise of the azure line. For that, they gained lands, wealth, and a permanent place in the upper ranks of imperial power. Wendi Zong was the third son of Jian Zong, Lord of Yanto, and was previously a cavalry officer before joining the war ministry. He worked his way up and became the minister himself, quite the accomplishment for someone who was not expected to inherit his family’s fortune.

“Minister Zong,” Joon greeted him.

“Lord Joon. So nice to finally make your acquaintance. Thank you for accepting my invitation,” they both sat down and started eating.

“How might I help you, Minister?” Joon asked.

“You spoke with Lord Buko today. I would like to know what was discussed,” Zong went straight to the point.

“You couldn’t have just asked me?”

“Come now, my lord. You know how this works. Besides having the pleasure of your company, I must tell you that you are in a very precarious position.”

Joon swallowed some seared fish. “You don’t need to explain it to me, Minister. I have my share of headaches because of Prince Daeron.”

“But you also cannot deny that the dragon prince can potentially offset the balance amongst the officials. It’s the direction that he will go that everyone is interested in.”

“And how am I supposed to know that?”

“You took him in, even though you had nothing to gain from it at first. You also were privy to the kinds of private thoughts that he might have had.”

Joon cleared his throat. “My duties no longer align with Prince Daeron. You are asking the wrong man.”

“Hmmm,” the war minister said aloud before drinking his tea. “They told me that you would be
guarded, reluctant in revealing your true beliefs.”

“I beg your pardon?” Joon blinked.

“I have a very productive relationship with Lord Buko. He might not be the most influential man in the army, but his position here in the capital means that his words cannot be ignored. And you should understand that Lord Buko is not the only one who is dissatisfied with the current state of things.”

Oh, no. You too?

“I might be a governor, but I am a soldier first. I have no interest in anything that will cause upheaval in the empire,” Joon made very clear.

“Interesting... I never said anything that would indicate my support for Lord Buko and other men like him, but you reacted strongly when I mentioned him,” Minister Zong observed.

Joon gulped. What are you going to do now?

“All right,” the minister yielded. “Allow me to ask you this. What do you think of Captain Dao?”

Joon was surprised. “What about him?”

“A man with a position that affords him a close relationship with the Crown Prince. He spends more time with his male companion rather than with his lawful wife, which is alarming considering that he doesn’t have an heir. Did you know that Captain Dao’s family were able to gain much from his relationship with the Crown Prince?”

“Not the first time that it happened,” Joon pointed out.

“True, but Lord Dao is aligned with the Prime Minister. The gods, and the empire, better prepare themselves should the Prince Sumeng become emperor. But mark my words, it’ll be the reign of Emperor Shu.”

Joon was very baffled at that moment. Minister Zong clearly disliked Prince Sumeng and also had some sympathy with the views of Lord Buko and other like-minded men. He couldn’t tell if he really supported Princess Khiara or sided with the disaffected army officers.

It was then that Lord Joon saw that the empire was more fragile than he ever realized. The Prime Minister held control over half of the court and bureaucracy, Princess Khiara had the fleet and other parts of the court on her side, the number of disgruntled army officers in the south not in the Prime Minister’s pockets had reached dangerous levels, and everyone knew that Prince Yujin had connections with the criminal underworld. With all this tension, it’ll take someone doing something foolish in order for things to turn nasty. No matter who triumphs, it’ll be the end of the empire as we all know it.

Joon sat through more of Minister Zong’s words and the dinner thankfully ended without incident. But with all of this hostility growing, he couldn’t just return to Kushiro. He knew that he was too powerful to remain neutral and any choice he made would endanger him one way or the other. Which path has the least danger and the most security for myself and my family? He would have to ponder that question some more when he returned to his residence in the capital.

Daenerys sat across Tyrion in the Great Pyramid, having made her point on breaking the wheel. Initially skeptical on the Imp’s arrival, accomplished by Ser Jorah, and then wanting to kill the Lannister for what his brother Ser Jaime did, Tyrion was able to persuade her to both not kill him and to be lenient to the exiled Mormont knight for breaking her trust.
They then had a rather long but productive discussion on what could be done now that she was in a position of power. She made it very clear that she intended to return to Westeros and would leave Meereen behind, trusting that the smallfolk would rally to her. Tyrion tentatively agreed with her, but she knew that he disbelieved such a notion. It made her question just for a moment on whether her actions in undoing slavery was worth it, but she shook off such doubts as quickly as they came. There might have been a few detractors, but she wasn’t concern herself with such trivialities when the majority of the freedmen were starting something new. And it was all because of her. Not just me. I have Missandei and Grey Worm to help me, she reminded herself.

“House Targaryen is gone,” Tyrion said unequivocally. “Not a single person who shares your blood is alive to support you! The Starks are gone, as well, our two terrible fathers saw to that. The remaining members of House Lannister will never back you, not ever. Stannis Baratheon won't back you, either. His entire claim to the throne rests on the illegitimacy of yours! That leaves the Tyrells: not impossible, not enough.”

Daenerys narrowed her eyes at Tyrion, unpersuaded. “Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell: they're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground.”

“It's a beautiful dream, stopping the wheel,” Tyrion kept showing his doubt. “You're not the first person who's ever dreamt it.”

“I'm not going to stop the wheel,” Daenerys kept her hard stare on Tyrion. “I'm going to break the wheel. And you're wrong about something else.”

“What would that be?” Tyrion clasped his hands together.

“Someone of my blood is alive, and he will support me when the time comes,” Daenerys remembered the comely man she had met in the flames and when she had comforted him over his loss.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. I’ve certainly heard of the rumors that your nephew born of Princess Elia, Aegon, was alive and in the care of Jon Connington. However, I took no stock in them. Even if it were true, nobody will readily accept this ‘Young Griff’ as king, since he will have to prove beyond doubt that he didn’t die when the Mountain crushed his head,” Tyrion explained.

Daenerys had also heard of the rumors and was also skeptical, but she shook her head. “No. You and I are thinking of two different men. I refer to Daeron Targaryen.”

“Ah,” Tyrion nodded in understanding. “I’ve heard of him too, courtesy of Lord Varys before we were separated at Volantis.”

“Are you doubtful of his existence too?” Daenerys knew what she saw and wasn’t going to be dissuaded.

“Before I’ve heard of this ‘Young Griff,’ Varys informed the small council of this Daeron’s existence through the birds he had,” Tyrion revealed.

That worried Daenerys, especially since Joffrey and Tywin would certainly be aware. “What did he tell them?”

“He said that there were reports of a Targaryen east of the Bone Mountains who was rising in power and strength, with the azure emperor recognizing his claim. From how he described it, this Targaryen, in the grasps of the Yi-Ti, was a legitimate threat because not only did he have the
backing of an entire empire, he had a dragon at his disposal, a live one,” Tyrion said.

Daenerys swallowed, hiding her apprehension because that was already a lot of information that Varys gave. “What else did he say?”

“He said that this Targaryen might become a rival to you, and that he might fight you since he had powerful backing and a dragon. Of course, my father was not ready to believe that he had failed in ridding Rhaegar’s brood and the other members of the small council did not accept it. What got me curious was how Prince Oberyn reacted. Unlike the other times I’ve met with him, he didn’t say anything and was unusually calm about it. I couldn’t understand why,” Tyrion stated.

*I’ve never met Prince Oberyn, but that is interesting,* Daenerys noted. On the other hand, the notion of Daeron fighting her was ridiculous, as she had met him and there was no malice between them. “Anything else?”

“When we were sailing eastwards, Lord Varys told me that had not revealed everything about this Daeron. He said and I quote, ‘The Baratheons, the Lannisters, Tyrells… I bear them all no ill will. What I withheld to them was not out of malice. It was for the realm. For the children. I cannot allow bad causes continue unimpeded.’”

Daenerys sat back down, not expecting Varys to say that given that he so easily switched allegiances from her family to the usurper. “Why should I trust his reasonings? From what you’ve just told me, he doesn’t seem very trustworthy.”

“But you also cannot deny that he could’ve told more about this Daeron if he wanted to,” Tyrion pointed out.

“What else does he know?”

“Well,” Tyrion leaned back in his chair. “He told me that this Daeron is not alone, and that there are others from Westeros with him. When he told me the names, I myself was surprised.”

“Who else?”

“Namely, Samwell of House Tarly, eldest son of Randyll Tarly, and Benjen Stark, third son of Rickard Stark.”

Daenerys was familiar with Randyll Tarly, the only commander who had fought for the Targaryens and won against the usurper. She had also heard of Benjen Stark, but he played no prominent role in the rebellion from as far as she could tell. “Why did their names surprise you?”

“They’re supposed to be at the Wall, Samwell about to take his oaths and Benjen the First Ranger. How they were able to make from that far north to Yi-Ti… I can’t explain it.”

“Is it because the Starks are so honorable that breaking their oath would be incomprehensible to them?” Daenerys asked.

“Exactly, which makes the whole situation confusing. If it’s true, what reason does Benjen Stark have to abandon his post?”

“What about this Samwell Tarly?”

“He’s no warrior, like his father and younger brother Dickon,” Tyrion had to suppress a laugh at that name. “I suspect his father was so disappointed that he forced his eldest to go to the Wall so that his younger son could inherit Horn Hill.”
Daenerys took all of this in. *So, there are two other potential allies that I could work with, if I approach this carefully.*

“Now, onto the most important matter. What exactly does Lord Varys know of Daeron?”

“Like with the rumors of ‘Young Griff,’ Daeron is the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and therefore his claim to the Iron Throne is very strong, stronger than yours, with all due respect,” Tyrion shrugged. “But Varys said that his mother was Lyanna Stark, and that his birds in the Golden Empire told him that Rhaegar had married her in secret.”

“Married her?” Daenerys had heard of the stories of Rhaegar kidnapping Lyanna Stark, but she tried to ignore them since they usually came from those who benefited from Robert’s assuming the throne.

“Yes. And that Ned Stark disguised him as his bastard son Jon Snow in order to protect him. Varys himself was skeptical, but because he had a dragon of his own, no one in Yi-Ti questioned him,” Tyrion shook his head while laughing. “And just when I thought Ned Stark couldn’t be more honorable.”

*Indeed,* Daenerys thought. Although loathing the best friend of the usurper, she realized that she owed much to the deceased Lord of Winterfell, for he made a great personal sacrifice in order to safeguard his family. And if it weren’t for him, Daeron wouldn’t have survived.

“Meleys,” Daenerys spoke. “The dragon’s name is Meleys.”

Tyrion narrowed one of his eyes. “How did you know that?”

“Believe it or not, Lord Tyrion, I met this Daeron.”


“First time I met him was a few years ago, before my dragons were born,” Daenerys relieved the memory. “It was after Drogo died and he comforted me when I was alone and had lost almost everything. But after seeing him and proving that he was indeed blood of my blood, that’s when hope reentered my being.” She was dreamlike when she described it. “And I repaid the favor, when he lost his first love.”

Tyrion was struck. Not ready to disbelieve Varys’ words, he started to become more convinced that Daeron was real and that would change everything. “And how did you meet him?”

“I don’t know how much you believe of what we Targaryens had, but I met him through the fire, through the dreams. Only those with dragon blood could do that and we both have it,” Daenerys didn’t care if Tyrion was unconvinced. She knew what she saw, and no one would tell her otherwise.

Tyrion gave her another look. “I can only think of one reason why you would be convinced of his existence. Most would be wise to take it with some skepticism, but you don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have some… attraction to him, from what I can see.”

“Yes,” Daenerys wasn’t going to deny it. “He’s a dragon, like myself. We are only ones left, so we can’t ignore each other. But I’ve also seen his heart and he would never wish me ill, because how could a man with malice give me hope and help me through a dark time when he had nothing to
gain from it?”

Tyrion nodded, conceding her point. “I wonder if it’s possible to fall in love through dragon dreams alone,” he teased her.

Daenerys chuckled. “And I know that at some level, he has the same feelings towards me. He might need some more time before he can admit it.”

Tyrion shrugged. “I guess. But this changes things very much. Because he has his own dragon and is the son of Rhaegar, he has a very strong claim to the Iron Throne, but history has shown us that such things don’t matter if you have the strength. If I were him, I would contemplate marriage. In the past, you might’ve had to settle for one of the major lords in Westeros. But given your words on the great houses and your feelings towards this Daeron, a marriage to him would unite both of your claims into one, neutralizing a very major obstacle, and whatever children you have will be undisputed.”

Daenerys grinned at Tyrion’s words. “I do like the sound of that.”

“But there remains one problem. Why hasn’t he come to you?” Tyrion had to ask. “If he has a dragon, he has all the strength he needs to come here, unite with you, and work with you to eventually return to Westeros.”

Daenerys did wonder that a few times, but she had to remember that like herself, Daeron had to gather his own strength and he was in a good place to do it. Also like herself, it wasn’t going to be easy, as he would have to ward off those who had designs on him and be able to stand on his own. She wondered if he had to deal with his own Xaro and his own Good Masters and Great Masters.

“Because contrary to what you might think, having a dragon is not enough,” Daenerys told him straight. “As you can see, I have three dragons, but I need the Unsullied, the freedmen, the Dothraki, and the Second Sons combined in order to keep order in my lands and have tangible means of authority. Daeron has one dragon and he’s in a much more difficult situation than I am, mainly because he has to survive in an empire.”

Tyrion nodded. “Yes. I might have only a small idea on how the game of thrones is played out in Yi-Ti, but it can’t be easy for anyone, especially for someone who was raised as a bastard.”

Daenerys flinched at that word, but she brushed it off. “Exactly. I don’t know exactly what he faces in the land of a thousand cities, but I know for sure that he’s not going to leave until he can return to Westeros with an army. That’s what he should do, or he’s not living up to his namesake.”

Tyrion rubbed his chin. “I don’t what prompted either Rhaegar or Jon’s mother to choose the name ‘Daeron.’ He was a great warrior, no doubt, but he was not very good at the other aspects of kingship.”

“That’s because he didn’t have enough time to prove to others what kind of king he will be,” Daenerys responded. “But waging a war at fourteen… Westeros has not seen a great leader since and I am very confident that the new Daeron will live up to, even surpass, the achievements of the Young Dragon.”

Tyrion exhaled. “Point taken. But are you willing to wait for more years until Daeron Targaryen comes to you with an army?”

“I’ve been waiting for my chance my entire life,” Daenerys answered. “A few more years isn’t that much to add on.”
Tyrion bobbed his head. “As you wish. But I would caution against waiting too long. Who knows what will happen with each day that Joffrey remains on the Throne?”

Daenerys had heard Tyrion’s account of what had happened during the wedding of Joffrey and Margaery, and how Tommen was poisoned. She didn’t feel anything about the boy dying, even though he was noted to be very kind, but Tyrion was immediately accused because someone had planted evidence that he supplied the poison. Many couldn’t understand what motive Tyrion would have in killing Tommen, but Cersei was irrational and wanted blood. Fortunately, before his trial could commence and before Cersei did something, Varys set him free with Jaime’s help and that’s how he ended up in Essos.

“Do not worry. I don’t intend on having that shit remain on what isn’t his, although I should be grateful, as people should begin to understand that the Seven Kingdoms are lost without the right leadership,” Daenerys stated.

“As for this Daeron, maybe it’s time you send someone there to initiate contact. I won’t argue that you’ve seen him without actually seeing him, but you need something more regular. After all, he might be the key to your problems,” Tyrion noted.

“It’s going to be difficult to do that, considering that I would have send someone through the Jade Gates. And there’s no guarantee that the messenger will even reach him. My best option now is to wait until our next connection,” Daenerys argued.

Tyrion took another sip of the wine. “And when will that be, if I might ask?”

“When the time is right.”

Tyrion decided to leave it at that. After Daenerys returned to the balcony overlooking Meereen, she heard the familiar footfall of Daario in her chambers. “What is it?”

“I have come to report on the hunt for the Sons of the Harpy,” the commander of the Second Sons declared.

Ah, yes. Turning around, she stared at Daario. “Well?”

“After combing through the city, I have reason to believe that we might be facing a wider conspiracy aimed against us.”

“Wider?” She rose an eyebrow.

“Meaning that Meereen might not be the only place where the Sons of the Harpy are operating.”

“What proof do you have of that?” she crossed her arms.

Daario pulled out a letter. “I searched the area around the well again, where I found the harpy before Mossador killed him. While I did so, I found his letter, which was addressed to the Sons of the Harpy in general. It reads: ‘Do not worry. The reign of the beggar queen shall not last, for there be others of her blood to take her place and who are more amenable to our interests. You can expect an unveiling soon and you’ll see who I am referring to. Until then, continue what you have been doing and cause trouble. Never make the dragon queen at ease. Signed, S.”

Daenerys snatched the letter from Daario’s hand and her eyes widened. “S?”

“I don’t know, but I’m looking more into it. But this shows that we might have a bigger problem than we all have thought,” Daario answered.
Daenerys nodded. “All right. Do what you have to do.”

Daario took the letter out of her hands and grasped them. “Want me in your bed tonight?”

Daenerys took her hands out of his. “No. That’ll be all, Daario.”

“Come now. It’s been weeks since we’ve had each other’s company. You must feel a longing to be in my arms again.”

Daenerys had to remember that she might have found Daario magnetic in a way, but ever since she was aware of Daeron’s existence, she knew that a far more suitable and more handsome man was out there, and she wasn’t going to give her heart to anyone else. Still, being a ruler came with a burden and she found Daario’s embrace in her bed as a good release.

But recently, she sensed that Daario was going to seek more, more than what she was willing to give, and thus she needed to set boundaries.

“I’ll make one thing clear. You swore your sword to me, and you’ve served me well, but just because I invited you to my bed doesn’t make us equals. I am your ruler and you are my subordinate. Continue to serve me, and you will be rewarded far beyond your wildest imaginations.”

“You are my reward,” Daario tried to come close to her, but she stepped back.

“No. This,” she gestured to herself. “I cannot give. And you made it clear to me that you are attracted to me because I am a queen, but that won’t end well for either of us. There has to be mutual affection between us and that’s not there. Do you understand now?”

Daario blinked and sighed. “So… it’s going to be like that?”

“You should know better,” Daenerys bluntly said.

“Have your eyes on another, then?” Daario asked.

“That’s none of your concern.”

“So, there is one,” Daario nodded. “Who is he?”

“I said, it’s none of your concern,” Daenerys repeated.

Daario realized that he wasn’t going to get anything else and turned to leave. “I shall find out who that man is and challenge him. See if he’s worth of a queen like you.”

Daenerys let out a heavy sigh. Lord Tyrion does have a point, she thought to herself. When will I see Daeron?

Years had gone by and she had yet to see the other true dragon in person. She didn’t want to rush Daeron, as he needed to develop his own power, but there was a point where she couldn’t wait anymore. It was either he came to her or she would go to him if she must. I don’t care how long it takes for me to search, if it comes to that. I will find him, and we will be one, she promised herself.

She looked eastwards, in the direction where Yi-Ti was supposed to be. And she thought of all the good that would come when they do meet, starting from their embrace. Please hurry, Daeron. I don’t think I can do this any longer without you, she spoke silently, hoping he could hear it.
Varys walked through the city of Tolos, escorted by those who he was in league with. He had arrived a few weeks prior and would eventually move on to Meereen, his and Tyrion’s final destination. But first he needed to make arrangements for the next step of his plan.

He sent a raven to Lys, his home, where he kept someone of the utmost importance hidden for the past twenty years. He kept a regular correspondence with the people he trusted back in Lys while he was in King’s Landing, but the raven he sent contained a message that simply said, “It’s time.”

During the few weeks he waited for the Lysene vessel to arrive, he wasted no time in making the necessary preparations for the critical step of his plan. He got into contact with retainers of Hizdhar zo Loraq, who had influence in Tolos. But ever since he declared his loyalty to Daenerys Targaryen, he had failed to realize that some of them had started to become very angry with how much they were losing from the eradication of slavery. Amongst the most angered were some of the slaves themselves, particularly those who enjoyed privileges from tormenting their supposed compatriots. History is filled with ironies, Varys mused. The dragon queen was trying to end slavery and bring freedom to all. Many might have cheered for her, but many others groaned.

What added to his problems was the fact that there was another Targaryen running free, but this one was far beyond his reach. There was simply no way he could exert any influence east of the Bone Mountains and past the insurmountable obstacles of the Golden Empire. This Targaryen, named Daeron after the Young Dragon and the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark disguised as Jon Snow, presented a far bigger threat than Daenerys in Varys’ mind.

Through secret channels, he got into contact with those aligned with “Young Griff” and Captain Strickland of the Golden Company. Although he didn’t meet him directly, Varys remembered Jon Connington from the days before the Rebellion and the former lord of Griffin’s Roost had not changed titles, only he was the Hand for the one he claimed to be Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar through Elia. Varys didn’t know of the veracity of Aegon’s blood claim, but he certainly had to be a better option than the blonde shit on the throne, whose behavior was driving the realm further into the abyss.

The council should’ve understood that the Boltons were a poor choice to replace the Starks, especially given that the wildling threat to the Wall is more serious than anyone thought and most of the northern houses are not cooperating with Lord Roose, who they all see as the chief beneficiary of the Red Wedding. And how long do they think that they can keep ruling with Joffrey on the throne, particularly when he’s becoming more unhinged by the day? Varys rubbed his hands through his bald scalp in frustration.

Varys already had a plan in which “Young Griff” could rise to take Daenerys’ place, but how he could deal with Daeron Targaryen was another matter. Solve one problem before moving onto the next, he reminded himself.

Arriving at the arranged location, Varys stepped inside the manse and was led down several hallways. He finally arrived at what he assumed to be a master’s apartment, which was unsurprisingly richly decorated and with several slaves standing at attention.

The slave gestured Varys to sit down. He waited for a few more moments before a set of doors creaked open, from which a man adorning a golden harpy mask entered and sat across the former master of whisperers.

“I assume that you are the Harpy?” Varys asked in High Valyrian. The Harpy nodded silently. “I trust you received my messages?”

“And they were received with much appreciation, Lysene,” the Harpy answered. “But your
alternative being of dragon blood is of little consequence to us, as the dragon whore is ruining everything, and we must stop before she does more damage.”

“As I explained earlier, my alternative will take the dragon queen’s place while ensuring that normalcy will return to Slaver’s Bay,” Varys replied. “He will see that you are all compensated for the times that you were without slaves and that those who were freed will return to their proper stations. Meanwhile, he expects the Masters to support his claim to the Iron Throne with money, ships, and troops.”

“Of course,” the Harpy nodded.

Varys became unsure from how quickly he answered. “Are you sure you can deliver on your end?”

“As you might have presumed, not all slaves were supportive of the dragon queen’s actions. I myself had to watch as the ones below me behaved in ways that I never imagined, all of them to my disadvantage,” the Harpy answered. “It’s only been a few years, so whatever damage she caused could be undone.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Varys pointed out.

“The Masters are anxious to recoup their losses,” the Harpy spoke. “And they’re willing to do anything for that to happen. And because slaves outnumber the masters’ themselves, I can easily turn on them as the dragon queen showed. In the end, they will have to listen to those like me if they want to keep slaves in line. So yes, I can make them deliver. Just as long as your alternative is willing to restore and keep slavery.”

“I have been in close contact with his key advisors. He understands that if he wants to have material support, he must retain slavery,” Varys affirmed.

“Good. I’ll let my followers know.”

“And just how soon will you be ready to strike?”

“As soon as we have final confirmation from your people,” the Harpy replied.

Then, another servant rushed into the apartment. “Ship on the horizon, from Lys.”

“Ah,” Varys stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, I must see to this personally. I’ll be back once this is done.” The leader of the Sons of the Harpy bid him leave, and Varys walked as fast as he could to the Tolos docks.

There, the vessel had been tied to the pier, with its Lysene crew already disembarking. Varys stood as straight as he could, preparing himself for the moment that came.

Heavily armed Lysenes and Tyroshi stepped off the plank. They were followed by a group of women attendants, plucked from the pleasure houses of Lys, and then the main article herself.

Varys had been sent regular letters on how this woman grown had become quite the beauty. Although it has been over twenty years since he had last seen her, he found that there was no exaggeration with who he looked at.

Slim, graceful, and tall, she had wavy black hair and tanned skin that spoke of the other half of her ancestry. With thick eyebrows, good nose and chin, and beautiful lips, the only thing that indicated her true ancestry came from her eyes, which were violet.
Varys looked at the woman up and down, noting how developed her body was and hardened she looked. He had arranged for someone to train her in combat arts, since she would need to be strong when the time came, and her instructor praised with ability with the Dornish spear and scimitar.

*What a fine woman she has grown into. Her mother would be proud,* Varys thought. *And just what I need, in case people question Young Griff’s parentage, as she would cement his claim.*

Varys bowed to the woman. “Welcome to Tolos, Princess Rhaenys.”

Rhaenys stared at him, looking upon her silent benefactor until now. She calmly let out her hand and he kissed, bidding her to follow him.

“It won’t be long, Your Grace,” Varys told her. “Soon, you’ll be one step closer to the throne.”

“Get it done,” Rhaenys simply spoke. “And when can I see my brother?”

“Soon, Your Grace,” Varys assured her. But he failed to notice her distrust towards him, as that was the answer that he gave the last time she asked.

*All we need is a spark, and all will be set in motion,* he thought.

Chapter End Notes

Didn't expect that, did you? I always intended for Rhaenys to be revealed as alive, but I don't think anyone else had done it like I did. And Varys, you conniving shit! You might have scored some goodwill with Dany in keeping key details of Daeron's existence from the Lannisters, but we all know your endgame with Faegon and Rhaenys.

I'm thinking that Rhaenys can be played by Anjli Mohindra, who I enjoyed from Bodyguard (which had our boy Richard Madden deliver a stunning performance).

Joon is in trouble, since he now has to deal with potentially rebellious army officers who are growing more discontent with court. He might understand where they come from, but he cannot join them since he doesn't condone rebellion.

As for Dany, she has to put the foot down with Daario, since she knows Daeron is out there and is waiting for him. We can only guess how that'll conclude.

So much has happened. Hope you guys enjoyed it!
Hi, guys! Hope you all are continuing to be safe and healthy!

Like the last chapter, lot to cover. So fasten your seatbelts :)

Benjen clinked his cups with Minoru Lim, happy that he accepted his invitation. One of the officers at Si Qo had resigned in protest of Benjen assuming command, saying that he would rather serve in some backwater rather than under an “up-jumped white devil.” Relieved that one potential problem was resolved before he had to deal with it, he sent a message to the Northwest Army and offered Lim the position of Major-General of the Foot, a significant promotion from brigade lieutenant. Besides being a good officer, Lim valued his career and any position southwards would be beneficial for him. Most importantly, there was a greater emphasis on the infantry than on the cavalry at Si Qo, so he was making Lim his third-in-command.

“Thank you for coming… General,” Benjen smiled.

“No, thank you, General Benjen,” Lim grinned. “Never in my life did I consider being posted to the south, especially so close to the capital. But I have to really be careful, as this is quite the step up for me.”

Benjen nodded. “Of course. I’m not secure in my position yet. The officer before you resigned because he didn’t want to take orders from a white devil.”

“His loss then,” Lim shrugged off.

“How have the men been doing in my absence?” Benjen asked.

“They miss you,” Lim answered. “How can they forget the man that led them into combat and made them respectable again? But they also understand that you are very close to the seat of power, so you’ll do a lot of good here.”

“If only the others shared your optimism,” Benjen was grateful.

“I take it that the other officers don’t like you?” Lim inquired.

“Wasn’t so sure, until I started to investigate some ‘disappeared brigades,’” Benjen revealed. “That’s when I knew that a few of my officers were probably involved in what was happening.”

“By those brigades, you are referring to army formations that only exist on paper but are phantoms in reality?” That got Lim’s attention.

“How would you know that?” Benjen set his cup down.

Lim sighed. “As you know, my father is a merchant. I tried to not think too much on how he provided for the family, but after I was commissioned, I went through some paperwork and found some discrepancies in supply reports.”
“When did this happen?” Benjen was very curious now.

“I was a company lieutenant in the southwest province, but what troubled me was that my father’s name was on all of them.”

“Your father profited from selling army supplies on the market?” Benjen picked up on.

“Not only that, that’s how he was able to pay for that house he still lives in at Asabhad,” Lim shook his head. “I confronted my father, but he said nothing to me. The next day, I was reassigned to the Northwest Province, where I remained until now.”

“You think your father had something to do with that?”

“I know it. His money, or I should say our money, allowed him to develop connections with the officials in the southwest province. I guess he thought I became too curious and silenced me by sending me elsewhere,” Lim scoffed.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Benjen offered.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Lim waved off. “It’s something that I should have learned earlier. Those with power and coin, they rule. Those without, they don’t last if they try to do right.”

Benjen could understand where he came from, but it wasn’t entirely correct. “Maybe one of these days, you’ll see that the good eventually triumph. Doesn’t matter how long, but it does happen.”

Lim was unsure. “The way I see it, General, that rarely happens.”

Benjen was about to respond when someone knocked on the screen door. “Who is it?”

“Oh, right. He knew that he had forgotten something, and it was Mingyu performing for him in private after she offered. Her performance was received with a standing ovation from the troops and even Benjen found himself enjoying her music, even though he couldn’t fully understand them.

“Let her in,” Benjen ordered.

In came the singer Mingyu and her male helper. With her perfectly round face, soft black hair, glittering brown eyes, and white skin, any man would have wanted to be next to her and in her bed if they were so audacious. But Benjen reminded himself that was an army officer and a former First Ranger, and his main priorities were professional in nature.

At the same time, Mingyu had requested to perform before a white devil and Benjen couldn’t be seen denying a woman’s request.

Mingyu bowed her head. “Good evening, General Stark. I hope you enjoyed my performance tonight.”

“I did. You sing very well,” Benjen complimented her.

“You honor me very much, General,” Mingyu sat down while her helper adjusted her koto. “It warms my heart to see that songs can be enjoyed across different cultures.”

“Indeed,” Lim joined in. “There were certain bards from the Free Cities and from the Reach that I came to enjoy listening to. I suppose music is one of those things that can be understood by everyone.”
“Well said, General Lim,” Mingyu acknowledged the new officer. “The song I will perform is about someone who practices love, but the one receiving it cannot reciprocate even though they have a close relationship. The words in this song is that one’s reflection on how understand love. I hope you enjoy it.”

Benjen and Minoru gave her their full attention, as her helper played a flute while her fingers strummed each string of the koto.

“Píng shénme yào shīwàng cáng yǎnlèi dào xīnzàng wàngshí bù huì shuōhuāng bié gèn tā wéinán wǒmen liàng rén zhì jiān bù xīyào zhèyàng wǒ xiǎng”

Besides her beautiful voice, which sounded light and had a high pitch, Benjen found himself moved by the words that he only could comprehend.

“Xiūliàn àiqíng de xīnsuān xuèhù fāng hǎo yǎqián de kēwàng wǒmen nàxiē xǐnyǎng yào wàngjì duō nán yuǎn júlí de xīnshǎng jīn júlí de miwǎng shuì shuō tāiyáng huì zhāoào yuèliàng biérén yǒu de āi wǒmen bù kěnéng mófǎng “Xiūliàn àiqíng de bēi huān wǒmen zhèxiē nǔlì bù jiǎndān kuàiliè liàn chéng lèishūǐ shì yǐzhǒng yǒnggǎn jǐnián qián de huānxǐǎng jǐnián hòu de yuǎnlìàng wéi yī zhǎng lián qù yǎng yǐshēn shǎng bié jiāng xiǎngniàn wǒ wǒ huì shòu būliǎo zhèyàng”

From the few words that Benjen knew fully, he began to reflect on a time lost when he tried to find love. And the wounds were still fresh.

“Xiàozhe shuō ài ràng rén fēngkuáng kāzhé shuō ài ràng rén jīnzhāng wáng būliǎo nà gèrén jiù tóuxiāng “Xiūliàn àiqíng de bēi huān wǒmen zhèxiē nǔlì bù jiǎndān kuàiliè liàn chéng lèishūǐ shì yǐzhǒng yǒnggǎn jǐnián qián de huānxǐǎng jǐnián hòu de yuǎnlìàng wéi yī zhǎng lián qù yǎng yǐshēn shǎng bié jiāng xiǎngniàn wǒ wǒ huì shòu būliǎo zhèyàng “Jǐnián qián de huānxǐǎng jǐnián hòu de yuǎnlìàng wéi yī zhǎng lián qù yǎng yǐshēn shǎng bié jiāng xiǎngniàn wǒ wǒ huì shòu būliǎo zhèyàng”

Once the plucking of the koto stopped and the flute ceased blowing, Benjen and Minoru clapped softly.

“Thank you for performing, my lady,” Benjen said as Minoru Lim bid him good night.

“Not at all, General. It’s not every day that I see a man in your position who hasn’t let the good things get to his head,” Mingyu spoke.

“What?” Benjen was surprised.

“Let’s see,” Mingyu looked at him up and down. “From what I could tell, you are very fit, can take hardship, and you put all of your efforts whenever you can. Most men your age would be fat, slow,
and with drink lacing their breath.”

Finally, a woman in this land who is not afraid to speak her mind, Benjen thought. “What I can, I do. I’m glad to know that my efforts have paid off.”

Mingyu chuckled. “I’m sure. And indulge my curiosity. Is it true that you were at the wall of ice in Westeros?”

“I was the First Ranger of the Night’s Watch before coming here,” Benjen answered.

“And their oath was not to take a woman?”

“That’s correct.”

“Still, a man of your talents and your build must feel an urge to be inside a woman’s embrace,” she stepped closer to him.

“That’s what the other generals said to me when I told them of my exploits. They couldn’t believe it, as none of them are bachelors. But a small price to pay when you’re doing something honorable,” Benjen explained.

Mingyu nodded in understanding, which further baffled him. “Also, you can never know how men would act because they go after whoever their dicks point to.”

Benjen snickered. “Never have I heard a truer statement, my lady.”

Mingyu handed her flute to her helper, telling him to go back to his room, before closing the screen door. “I have a suggestion, General.”

“What would that be?” Benjen sat back down and gestured for Mingyu to do the same.

“I am being truthful when I say that I had a rather checkered upbringing. Being a singer doesn’t bring a stable income, so I had to do what I must to survive.”

Benjen listened, but he was not understanding why she revealed that. “I’m not quite following, my lady.”

“Because I can see that despite your honorable and serious air, you are not above the hardships of life. And I would like to understand how such a man could survive in a land where he was not born.”

Benjen’s first instinct was to escort her back to her chambers. However, even though she was a stranger, he felt more comfortable around her than any women he had been with, with the exception being his older sister Lyanna while she was still alive. Most significantly, he felt something stir inside him, a stir that had been dormant for twenty years. And he didn’t want it to end.

“What are you suggesting, my lady?”

“I propose a wager,” Mingyu brought out a small bag of silver taels. “This is thirty silver taels right here. We take turns in saying two truths and one lie. Whoever guesses the most lies correctly wins. If you win, you can have this bag. If I win, I get to dine with you, in your quarters.”

Benjen rubbed his chin, hiding his nervousness at this woman putting so much effort in spending time with him. But if I have to be honest, I don’t want our time to end. It was a feeling that he still couldn’t understand.
Yujin arrived at the docks of Yin in disguise, trying to hide his face from any imperial soldiers, members of the capital constabulary, and anyone who had regular business with the palace. He couldn’t be seen here, as that would raise questions and cause an investigation into his own malpractices, which would jeopardize the position of the people who needed him.

However, he didn’t come there out of a sincere desire to check on his associates. The shopkeeper, who sheltered Arya Stark, Gendry, and Sandor Clegane, was getting very displeased that his earners had not compensated him and had thus reached out to his boss, who controlled all illicit business on the docks. Unlike the shopkeeper, Yujin couldn’t afford to alienate the gang leader, as all of the gangs in the capital answered to him and he needed his underground resources to circumvent the Prime Minister, the emperor, his half-sister Khiara, and the dragon prince.

Yujin knocked on the door of the warehouse, which quickly opened. Entering, he was escorted past the various cargo that were stored there before either moving further inland or out onto the high seas by merchant ships. Finally, he found himself in an open area lined with cargo, with many cutthroats and villains of every sort imaginable in the space.

Pulling down his hood, Yujin looked at the leader himself. With tanned skin, hair tied backwards that resembled a horse’s tail, and wearing black robes, the eldest son of the emperor had understood that this was a man that should not be trifled with, as his brown eyes adopted a type of gaze only reserved for the most deadly of predators. And one of his impulses was to silent count the beads in his hand, which reflected his strong belief in the mystical.

“Behold, Prince Yujin has decided to grace us wretches with his presence!” the boss announced, causing giggles from the other gang members.

“The old man is starting to annoy me,” Yujin did not want to spend more time than necessary with the sorts he would never willingly rub shoulders with.

“That old man has been part of this gang for thirty years. He served my father, and he serves me now. He’s practically family,” the leader answered. “How could I ignore the concerns of my family, when he wants what is rightfully his?”

“I would say that he should’ve known better than to take in three white devils under his roof,” Yujin answered.

“How was he supposed to know that one of them, the girl, was the cousin and adopted sister of the dragon prince?” the leader pointed out. “If there is blame to be attached, it’ll be to you, since you clearly didn’t succeed in getting the old man his due.”

“Let me ask,” Yujin cut him off. “They’re just white devils. You can replace them with others who won’t care for them. Why is the old man so fixated on them?”

“It’s not a matter of money. It sends a bad message when those who owe us can just leave without paying us. The old man racked up expenses that included their living, their food, and the big one’s opium intake. He did not realize that he was paying less than the market price, and only because of the old man,” the leader made clear. “Either they compensate him, or their lives will be forfeit.”

“You sure that’s a good idea? The dragon prince has an actual dragon at his side. He’s not going to let you harm his family,” Yujin warned.

“Then help us find a way to lure that girl and her male friends away from his protection, or at the
very least scare them. We cannot allow those under us to believe that there are no consequences, especially given what will happen in the coming weeks,” the leader spoke.

“What’s happening then?” Yujin inquired.

“Vinh, get over here!” the leader barked. Another tanned man entered the space, but Yujin recognized him as the gang’s main man when it came to opium. “Tell him what you’ve told me.”

Vinh turned his head to Yujin. “There’s going to be a shipment due to leave the docks here within two moons, bound for the Shadow Lands. The poppy cultivators in the jungles have harvested a record amount, enough to produce forty tons of pure opium to sell on the market.”

*Forty tons?* Yujin’s eyes widened. It was rare for opium dealers to sell in tons, and that amount was more than enough to take over the market.

“An ounce of opium is worth thirteen silver taels on the open market. Final calculations led to profits amounting to exactly four million, sixty-two thousand, and five hundred silver taels,” Vinh finished.

Yujin was beyond shocked. *That amount is worth sixteen years of my annual income as a prince,* he silently said to himself.

“So, now do you understand why there must be discipline in our ranks? If it’s absent, that amount will be at risk and we will suffer irreparable damage,” the leader told him straight.

*Now comes the negotiation.* “For every hundred silver taels you make from this deal, I demand sixty.”

The gang and Vinh laughed at the ridiculousness of his demand.

“Not even close. I am open to allowing you twenty silver taels out of hundred,” the leader counter-offered.

“Fifty.”

“Thirty.”

“Forty.”

“Thirty-five, and I want a down payment of two hundred thousand silver taels.”

The leader crossed his arms. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I could easily turn you over to the Central Column. Don’t you know that opium production, importation, and exportation is punishable by death?”

Some of the gang members drew their weapons, but Yujin scoffed, as he could easily take them all out. *Only reason why I let them live is because I need them, and what they can do.*

The leader thought about Yujin’s last offer, since he also knew that fact, before nodding. “Thirty-five it is. But I will only give you the down payment after you persuade that girl and her companions to pay up. I don’t care how you do it.”

Yujin exhaled before bobbing his head. “Done. She’s not hard to find, so it won’t be difficult to push her.”
“But remember, Prince Yujin. I don’t care who your father is. Cross me, you will pay the price. Understand?”

Yujin highly doubted that, but for the sake of appearance and cooperation, he shrugged and walked out of the warehouse.

_Now, how to get that wolf bitch to reimburse the gang?_

“Get your hands off me! I am your Lord Commander!” Jeor barked as mutineers dragged him out of his quarters.

Forced into the training yard of Castle Black, Jeor found at least two dozen of his black brothers lined up. Among them was First Ranger Alliser Thorne, First Builder Othell Yarwyck, First Steward Bowen Marsh, and Janos Slynt while recognizing the boy Olly among the others. What surprised Jeor was that the other members of the Night’s Watch were merely watching, not interfering while this act of mutiny was taking place.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Jeor tried to shake off the black brothers who were holding his arms, but they didn’t budge. Alliser Thorne walked up to the former Lord of Bear Island and backhanded his face.

“Never in my life had I expected you to be a traitor,” Alliser Thorne spat at him.

“What are you talking about, First Ranger?” Jeor asked.

“Don’t play games with me, my lord. You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Thorne was losing his patience.

“You’re being vague, Ser Alliser. I’ve done many things, so you have to be more specific,” Jeor stated.

“We all know of your dealings with Mance Rayder,” Alliser announced to the yard. “Don’t deny that you have been in contact with him.”

Jeor turned pale. _What? How did they know?_ “You’re being ridiculous, Ser Alliser. My duty is to defend the Wall—”

“Oh, still denying it? Well then, allow me to refresh your memory. Bring him in!”

Two other black brothers brought a man into the yard by his arms and threw him down. It was clear to all that he was a wildling, but Jeor knew exactly who it was from the red hair and large build.

The hate that this wildling, Tormund being his name, had for Jeor was understandable and it was clear that he still had that towards the Old Bear. But if they wanted a chance to survive against the threat that was coming, they had work together. Even Tormund Giantsbane was wise enough to understand that, but why he was there instead of outside confused Jeor.

“I don’t know him,” Jeor kept denying.

“Oh, enough already,” Tormund groaned. “Even I know that you’re looking pathetic, crow.”

Alliser Thorne turned back to Jeor. “Ah, so he does know you.”

Jeor decided that enough was enough and dropped the pretense. “What are you doing here?” he
asked Tormund.

“Someone had to see if this place could be attacked. Although I can see that the crows here will not work with us.”

“Why would we work with you?” Olly made clear his hate. “You ravage our lands.”

“Because if you don’t, we both die,” Tormund answered ominously.

“How will we both die?” Bowen Marsh interrogated him.

“I don’t know if you’ll believe it, but the wights, the White Walkers, they’re back. And they’re coming,” Tormund wasn’t going to waste more time.

The rest of the Night’s Watch murmured amongst each other. While it was their duty to defend the realms of men, it had been too long since the feared evil had ravaged the world and thus the purpose of the Night’s Watch was largely neglected.

“This is just another ruse, another lie spun up so that these shits can ravage our lands some more,” Alliser Thorne scoffed.

“It’s not a lie, First Ranger,” Jeor cried out. “Othor was dead when he was brought back, but he attacked me. When I checked his body after it was burnt, his eyes were different. And regular steel didn’t affect him. Only fire stopped him and we both know that there is only one form of life in these parts that could affected by fire.”

This was the first time that the Thorne knight was hearing of this, but he was still not believing it. “What makes you think it was a wight and not some wildling trying to kill you in your sleep?”

“Wildlings don’t come after you even after you stab them multiple times,” Jeor shot back before turning to the rest of the Watch. “Brothers, please. You never knew me to be a liar and I would never make jokes out of serious matters. But I had to work with Mance Rayder because if we don’t allow them through the Wall, that’s thousands more wights to join the White Walkers. And we don’t have the strength to fight them even now.”

A few of the Watch, including Edd Tollett, started to waver, motivating Jeor to press on.

“We have a duty to defend the realms of men, and this is our chance to fulfill our oaths. I know that whatever the wildlings had done can never be forgiven, but we have to put aside our differences and work together. If we don’t, we will all die.”

Thorne, Olly, the First Builder, and First Steward shook their heads along with the many of the other members of the Watch.

“I would be careful not to dismiss the words of Lord Mormont,” Aemon made his presence known, stepping into the yard with the help of a steward from the library. “We throw aside claims of seemingly fantastical origin at our own peril. I haven’t seen evidence of the White Walkers, but I come from a line that could ride dragons. We all know that dragons existed at some point and we do not deny their existence because of that. The same must apply to wights coming from the north.”

“First Steward, please confine Maester Aemon to his quarters,” Thorne was now in no mood to hear anymore. “In light of Jeor Mormont’s crimes, I say he forfeited his position as our Lord Commander. All those in favor, say ‘aye.’”
To Jeor’s and Aemon’s shock, many did.

“As First Ranger, I will take over duties as Lord Commander until the next election,” Thorne self-appointed himself before unsheathing his sword. “For crimes against the Watch and the realms of men, I sentence you, Jeor Mormont, to death. If you have to anything to say, my lord, say them now.”

Jeor was about to open his mouth before a large eagle flew into the yard and started to scratch at Thorne. He struggled to push the eagle away and was close to striking it with his blade before it flew off.

Everyone in the castle heard deep rumbling, which only grew louder. Then, someone shouted, “Mammoths! Giants! They’re coming!”

The black brothers looked at each other with alarm, not expecting such creatures to show up. But Thorne took charge and tried to rally the men. However, they’re not quick enough, as the few men on the walls began to fall from the arrows hurled their way and the wildlings who managed to scale them in quick succession.

As for Tormund, he saw his opening. Pushing against the guards that held him, he grabbed his sword and started slashing away, engaged in fierce combat with the black brothers who remained in the training yard. Jeor acted quickly and grabbed Aemon.

“Quickly! We have to take shelter in my quarters!” he and the steward protected the elderly Targaryen. Miraculously moving through the confusion and knowing that he couldn’t take on Alliser Thorne or any of the younger black brothers in a fair fight, Jeor locked the door of his quarters behind him.

“What do we do now?” the steward asked fearfully.

“Now, we wait,” Jeor sat on the floor.

“This was your plan?” Aemon asked him.

“Aye, but they must’ve attacked early after seeing that I and Tormund were in trouble. But no one was supposed to get hurt. I didn’t want any bloodshed, so it was supposed to be a surprise attack,” Jeor promised Aemon.

“You don’t have to explain, Lord Commander,” Aemon assured him. “And I’m sure that it’s a surprise attack still. Most of the Watch were not manning their positions because they discovered what you were doing, so it shouldn’t take long for them to be overwhelmed.”

Jeor still didn’t like what was going on. He didn’t want any of his black brothers to die, as that meant less men to fight against the ancient evil. But he also had to remind himself that he was not in control of life and death and thus, he resigned himself to whatever would happen.

Screams could be heard from the other side of the door, as well as other sorts of sounds that didn’t belong to man. The tension rose among Jeor, Aemon, and the steward, their anxiety growing as they awaited the outcome. None of them were strong enough to intervene and there was no way to control the outcome of a battle.

After several long moments, the noise started to quiet down, causing Jeor to stand up. The door then knocked, with the Old Bear walking slowly up to it and readying his sword as he opened it. To his relief, it was Mance Rayder, the woman Ygritte, and Tormund.
“Lord Commander,” Mance greeted him.

“Mance,” Jeor acknowledged as he gestured for Aemon and the steward to follow them out.

Bodies filled the training yard, with the numbers of wildlings and black brothers equaling each other. He also saw two giants, a mammoth outside of the walls of Castle Black, and several wildlings standing over a few of the survivors, which included Edd Tollett and Alliser Thorne.

“You traitor!” Thorne growled through his teeth at Jeor before he was struck in the head by the Lord of Bones. Jeor passed by the bodies of Olly and Janos Slynt, whose chest had been flattened and his bones broken. He looked up and saw a giant, who grunted at him.

“So, Lord Commander, I’m glad that you recognized the threat,” Mance spoke. “But tell me. You allowed Benjen Stark to leave with his nephew, who you claimed is Daeron Targaryen, so that they can return with help. How soon could they come?”

“I have confidence that my nephew will come back before the threat becomes too dangerous,” Aemon joined in. “And with your Free Folk, we might have a chance.”

Mance Rayder nodded in agreement. “Indeed. But now, we must face the wrath of those further south, which includes the Boltons as you informed me.”

The reputation of House Bolton was known to the King Beyond the Wall. “If you use your people wisely, you have a chance. Allow me to help you, as you need me.”

Mance glanced at Ygritte and Tormund. “Well, he’s gotten us this far. We might need a southerner to show us the way,” Ygritte offered.

“I still want to kill him, but what kind of man will that make me, after what he did?” Tormund added.

Mance shook Jeor’s hand. “All right. You can come with us. And I’ll make sure that whatever’s left of the Watch will not be harmed.”

“Thank you,” Jeor nodded with gratitude.

“Open the gates!” Mance ordered.

Jeor made sure to nod his thanks to Orrel, whose intervention with his eagle had certainly saved his life, as he returned to his solar, gathering all of the important papers and stuffing them underneath his furs. The most important one was Benjen’s resignation, as without it, he might hang for desertion of the Watch. After all he would have gone through, that would be unfair, Jeor thought.

As he walked back to the training yard once more, he saw the first of one hundred thousand wildlings move through Castle Black and into the Gift. From there, they would proceed further south and into opposition. Jeor regretted that many of his black brothers died, but also accepted that it was necessary, as the one hundred thousand people that passed the Wall meant one hundred thousand less potential wights for the White Walkers.

But will it be enough? Jeor thought with worry, as the wildlings would now have to face the armies further south, potentially those of his skin from Bear Island.

Yohn Royce watched as Robin Arryn swung with his practice sword, but the Lord Paramount of the Vale was pathetically unsuited for combat and it was all on display for those who were
watching. The Lord of Runestone had delegated Lord Robin’s training to his master-at-arms, but he had largely given up trying to make him into a warrior as last on the same level as his father. Jon Arryn was long past his prime when the Rebellion broke out, but he had charisma and competence in leading men. *I dread the day Jon’s only heir reaches his majority.*

At the same time, Yohn Royce was hopeful in that Lord Robin’s presence in Runestone could at least undo some of the damage done by the late Lady Lysa and the worm Baelish. He was worried about what he had intended to do with Sansa Stark, who remained in the Eyrie at the moment, but he couldn’t move on Baelish since he could just slip out of whatever bind he found himself in. *Why did Jon Arryn ever think to give that son of a bitch power?*

One good thing that came out of the current situation was the fact that at least one of Ned Stark’s brood was alive and well, but for some reason, Baelish was hiding her in spite of the risks that came with his decision as long as Joffrey sat on the Iron Throne. The only reason why he knew was because he didn’t buy her cover as “Alayne Stone,” specifically since Baelish had come from King’s Landing, the last place where anyone had laid eyes Sansa Stark and Arya Stark. And Joffrey, or rather the Small Council dominated by Tywin, was offering a substantial reward for anyone with information regarding Sansa’s whereabouts as she was a “person of interest” in the death of Prince Tommen. *How Baelish got her out of the lockdown in King’s Landing is quite remarkable, but I still don’t like what he plans to do with her.*

During the final moments of Baelish’s visit to Runestone, Yohn was able to get Sansa away from his gaze and asked her straight, “Are you all right, my lady?”

Sansa blinked in confusion. “My lord?”

“Please,” Yohn tried to reassure her. “I knew your father. I hunted with him when he fostered in the Vale and it pained me very much when I heard of his death. I merely can’t understand why you trust that worm.”

Sansa breathed out, seeing no point in keeping up with the charade. “If it weren’t for him, I would not have gotten out of King’s Landing after the goldcloaks searched every gate and was about to close all of them after Tommen died.”

“Why did he do that?”

“He said that my survival was a favor to my dead mother,” Sansa said shakily.

Yohn Royce sighed while shaking his head. *Of course. Everyone knew that he had feelings for Catelyn Stark. In whatever manner that you came here, it pleases me very much to see you alive and well. Ned would be very happy.*

Sansa smiled while a tear left her eye. “Thank you, my lord. That’s… the first time in a while where I heard someone spoke well of my father.”

“The Vale could’ve helped your family, but with Lysa around, we couldn’t do anything. My only regret is that I didn’t push her hard enough to have the Vale support your family in their greatest moment of need,” Yohn declared to her.

Sansa let out more tears, obviously not expecting such sincerity after so long. “The fact that you are saying this to me… it makes me happy to see that at least one man had no ill will towards my family.”

“And I plan to atone for my failures by protecting any of the Starks left,” Yohn promised her. “But
first. Tell me truthfully. Has Baelish mistreated you, in any way?”

“No,” Sansa shook her head. “On the contrary. He gave me my aunt Lysa's jewels and wardrobe of silks, satins, velvets, and furs, although they are a bit large for me.”

Yohn smiled. *At the very least, she's not being abused as she probably was when Ned died.*

“Anything else, my lady?”

“Lord Baelish has been instructing me on how to conduct myself more ably in court, teaching me how the world really is. However, just like with Cersei, I sense that he has his own designs on me, and I am doing my best to keep my true feelings hidden,” Sansa replied.

Yohn nodded in approval. *Smart lady.* “You keep doing that. No one is strong enough to move against Baelish yet, as he has your cousin under his control, courtesy of his mother. But by chance, did he reveal any detail of his plan?”

“No explicitly, but he has been saying many good things about Ser Harrold Hardyng and saying that any woman who became his wife would be the envy of every highborn maiden in the Vale, and even in the riverlands,” Sansa explained.

Yohn took a moment to process that, and it didn’t take him long to figure out what Baelish was doing. *So, that’s part of your final plan, eh? Should Lord Robin die without an heir, Harrold Hardyng and all of his brood would become the new Lords Paramount of the Vale. Trouble was, everyone else in the Vale knew it and Ser Harrold himself was acting like he was already the overlord. Not helping matters was that he had fathered a few bastard children, which would really complicate matters of succession. At the moment, we have to choose between an inept child or an arrogant whoremonger, the Lord of Runestone thought in frustration.*

But… Yohn knew that Sansa couldn’t simply say no to Baelish’s maneuvers, as that could endanger her and make Baelish act more aggressively towards him since it wouldn’t be hard to find out where Sansa was learning defiance.

“My lady, I can only say at the moment to just… play along with Baelish’s plots. You don’t have to marry Harrold Hardyng if you don’t want to, but don’t outright refuse him. If you displease that weasel, what’s to stop him from returning you to Joffrey and resuming your suffering there?”

Sansa gulped. “I was abused and humiliated by that shit. As long as he’s there, I’m not going back.”

“Then we are in agreement,” Yohn Royce smiled with sadness. “No one your age should have to experience hardships like yours, but what you must focus on now is surviving. Meanwhile, I am trying to find other ways to ensure that the Vale doesn’t suffer under Baelish’s watch.”

“You don’t have to do that at my expense,” Sansa spoke.

“This is personal for me, my lady. Baelish has found more than one opportunity to humiliate me. Not only that, he’s jeopardized House Arryn through his control of your cousin. If I don’t act against him, who will?”

Sansa took Yohn’s hands in hers. “Thank you, my lord. Thanks to you, my time here shall become much more bearable with you in these lands.”

Yohn grinned. “Anytime. And if you need anything, send a courier to me. I don’t trust the ravens, since Baelish could read any of them.”
After Sansa and Baelish returned to the Eyrie, Yohn spared one more glance at Lord Robin and his master-at-arms before riding out to a practically secluded area of his lands. Making sure that no one was following him, he made sure to return to Runestone before nightfall, as any time later would result in too many questions asked.

An hour of travel by horseback later, Yohn arrived at his destination, his private hunting lodge. Many fond memories had happened because of this place, mostly due to Ned Stark when they both hunted wild game and honed their skills for battle. Now, it was mostly devoid of happy times, as most of Yohn’s friends were too busy and had aged considerably like himself. He didn’t have the energy as before, but he kept his lodge around for sentimental purposes.

And recently, the Lord of Runestone was relieved that he had kept his hunting lodge around, for it provided shelter for his most important guest. But he couldn’t reveal who was there, as it would attract the attention of the Lannisters’ men.

Pounding hard on the door, Yohn glanced around, checking one more time if anyone was watching. Hearing the door open, he quickly moved inside and shut the door behind him. He then looked at the man who had opened the door, relieved that he was still keeping healthy.

What was once a man who led armies against the Lannisters, only to be betrayed by those who were supposed to be loyal to him, was replaced by one who had become more disheveled, less sure of himself, and very much afraid. Looking past his overgrown hair and beard of red-brown and his blue eyes, he saw heartbreak and doubt. Who could blame him? I would be if I saw my mother and pregnant wife be killed before me.

“Did you have a good day, Robb?” Yohn asked him.

“Yes,” the son of Ned Stark answered. “Is there something urgent?”

“No,” he shook his head. “But I feel that it’s time we discuss the next step.”

“What next step?” Robb inquired.

“Surely, you can’t have expected to stay here forever,” Yohn pointed out. “After all, a Stark can’t just be idle, especially given the times that we’re in.”

Robb nodded in agreement before he followed Yohn to the dining hall.

After the events of the Red Wedding, Yohn had heard the worst things that had happened there, especially how the turncoats desecrated his corpse. But a few moons later and while trying to clear his mind in the hunting ground, he saw a man emerge from the trees with a large grey wolf. Alarm, Yohn moved to draw his sword, only for Robb Stark to raise his hands.

“Please, Lord Yohn! You are Yohn Royce, correct?” he asked.

“Who are you?” he kept his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“I am Robb Stark, son of Eddard Stark, and this is my direwolf, Grey Wind,” Robb answered.

Initially not believing him, Yohn look a closer look at the man. Despite having the Tully looks, he saw some resemblance to Ned Stark. What convinced was that he had Grey Wind with him, as the Lord of Runestone had heard that the King in the North was always accompanied by his animal companion.

Robb told him that one of his bannermen, Wendel Manderly, had pushed him up to one of the
windows of the great hall at the Twins, all of which were covered with thick tapestries. Since all of
the exits were blocked, Catelyn had Wendel force Robb out of his mourning for Talisa, ripped off
the tapestry over one of the windows while the crossbows flew and daggers stabbed. Robb didn’t
know if that would even work, since the window was too high.

But Wendel made it happen by grabbing a cub, throwing it at the window and smashing it, and
boosted him up before being several crossbow bolts entered his back. By instinct, Robb threw
himself out the window, but not before a couple of bolts entered his thighs.

Rolling off a roof and slamming into the ground, Robb pulled the bolts out of his flesh and covered
himself with a cloak he pulled off a dead Frey man. Limping as fast he could, he found Grey
Wind’s pen, unlocked it, and they just managed to force their way through the gate, the bloodbath
in the camp, and disappear into the night. As much as Robb wanted to stay and fight, he realized
that the battle was already lost and there was nothing he could to stop the massacre. Hiding in the
riverlands, they only traveled by night and he made his way into the Vale, where his trail must had
run cold, and that’s how he was able to make it all the way to Runestone.

The head of House Royce found the tale extraordinary in the worst sense, but he thanked the old
gods and the new that the son of his friend had survived against all odds.

From what Yohn could see inside the hunting lodge, Robb Stark had learned to cook by himself
and hunted some game from his hunting ground. And he saw that the grey direwolf had consumed
his own share of raw game, judging from the pile of bones in the corner.

After both sat down, Yohn could see that only one question was on his mind. “How is Sansa?”
Robb asked.

“She’s fine,” Lord Royce answered. “She just left Runestone today.”

As much as he wanted to, Robb couldn’t reveal his survival just yet. Yohn told him that she was
near Lord Baelish, and they both knew that he couldn’t be trusted to keep the fact that he was alive
a secret.

“What next step do you refer to?” Robb went straight to the point.

“Robb, as I said before, I’m very glad that you’re alive. But you can’t stay here forever. The longer
you do, the likelier that Tywin’s men will find you,” Yohn didn’t want him to leave, but this had to
be done. “And you might not be so fortunate the next time.”

Robb remembered how difficult it was to travel only by night, as it was the only way that he could
avoid Frey and Bolton patrols sent out to hunt down any of his loyalist and most likely himself.

“What do you suggest that I do then?”

“You can’t go back to Winterfell, not like this and certainly not while the Boltons are in control,”
Yohn stated. “You try to go back there by yourself, you’re a dead man.”

Yohn and Robb were both aware that the situation in the North was very fragile, especially since
they heard that almost all of the major houses refused to work with the Dreadfort.

“What about the Wall? My brother Jon is with the Night’s Watch. He can protect me,” Robb
suggested.

Yohn shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s not an option, either. There are rumors that the wildlings
have attacked in force and that the Night’s Watch are overwhelmed. You won’t last long there.”
Robb sighed in vexation. “Then what do you suggest I do?”

Yohn pulled out a piece of paper from his coat. “There’s a boat that will depart from Gulltown to Tyrosh within a few days. Show this pass to the captain and he’ll bring you and your creature aboard under the cover of darkness.”

Robb stood up, not believing what he was hearing. “You want me to run?”

“I want you to survive,” Yohn rose from his chair. “There’s nothing more you can do in Westeros. Even though many of the northern lords hate Lord Bolton, they’re not going to support you if you reappear. You have to admit that you made some serious mistakes during your war against the Lannisters.”

Robb bit his lip, the truth hurting and the pain from Talisa’s death still fresh. “If I leave Westeros, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Yohn put a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe… this is what the old gods want you to learn. How we behave in hardship determines who we become as men. Your father, my friend, was unjustly executed. Your mother murdered, your wife and unborn child butchered, one of your sisters not knowing if you are alive and the other missing, and your two younger brothers missing. But if everyone you loved had died, will you wallow in despair?”

Robb swallowed before finally shaking his head.

“Wendel Manderly threw you out of that window because he must’ve thought that you were worth it. Will you disrespect his sacrifice, and your mother for doing what any woman would do in her position?”

Robb exhaled before shaking his head again, resolve slowly entering him after a long while.

“Then go to Tyrosh. Either stay there or move elsewhere and find help if you can. Westeros might need you, but you can’t come alone,” Yohn squeezed Robb’s shoulder.

“What kind of help?”

Yohn searched his mind before finding the solution. “When Torrhen Stark bent the knee to Aegon the Conqueror, some refused to follow his example and went into exile in Essos. You can find the descendants in the sellsword group that still operates.”

Robb’s eyes widened. “The Company of the Rose?”

“They may be the sellswords, but you are a Stark and they might be more amenable to working for you.”

“But Lord Yohn, I don’t have gold,” Robb pointed out.

“That’s why I will give you some from my personal coffers to use as a down payment, plus some more to cover your living expenses.”

Robb shook his head. “My lord, I can’t accept that.”

“Then consider it a loan,” Yohn knew that Robb’s Stark honor would prevent him from accepting such a gift for no reward. “Pay me back when you return.”

Robb was still not sure of Yohn’s reasons. “Why are you doing this?”
Yohn gave him a look of regret. “I should have fought alongside you to avenge my friend, but my loyalty to the Arryns prevented that from happening. And now look what’s happened. This is my penance and I do hope for both of our sakes that you succeed where I failed.”

Robb looked at the man who gave him shelter for no other reason except friendship and was at a loss of words, because anyone else would’ve done so only if they had much to gain from his presence. But Yohn pulled him into an embrace, remembering how his son Robar had died and allowing his feelings of warmth for his son to be transferred to Robb, who didn’t have a father anymore.

Estimating that it would take only a full day to journey from Runestone to Gulltown, Robb had Grey Wind covered in a heavy cloak, telling him to stay quiet, while Robb would drive the cart and a portion of the Royce gold himself. To better blend in, he shaved off his beard and cut his hair while applying black dye.

Another thing that Yohn took comfort in was that Ned Stark left Robb the greatsword Ice, since he didn’t take it with him from Winterfell. And it was with Ice that Robb fought his battles and what allowed him to survive until he arrived at Runestone.

“The captain will send me a raven when you are onboard,” Yohn told him. “I will look after Lady Sansa as best as I can and make sure that Baelish doesn’t do anything foolish with her.”

Robb nodded gratefully. “Thank you. I will never forget this. And I promise to come back.”

“Just stay alive and cut down any who would harm you with Ice,” Yohn reminded him. “We’ll be waiting.” He watched as the cart drove further into the distance, Robb’s silhouette growing smaller. The Lord of Runestone could only pray that no complications would occur, and that Robb could find the Company of the Rose.

Ned, if you are up there, your son needs you. Please help him, Yohn pleaded.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, much to cover.

Benjen invited his second-in-command to Si Qo and gave him a promotion, so their partnership will last for a while. And what Mingyu is doing is part of the act, as she's just collecting information before she would have to carry out her contract. The question is, will Benjen know in time and will it go as expected?

I imagine the gang leader to be played by Jet Li and basing the gang arc from Lethal Weapon 4 (thanks for the suggestion, Longclaw 1-6). And oh boy, Yujin has a very powerful motivation to do what the gang asks (but they're not friends).

For the battle of Castle Black, without Jon and Sam there, it wouldn't have taken long for the wildlings to breach it and the Wall. And since Jeor is convinced of the White Walker threat, he tried to help Mance, but he was caught. Fortunately for him, Orrel saved his life. Even the Old Bear could still fight, he wouldn't have lasted long against giants, Free Folk who got the drop on the Watch, and mammoths. More importantly, he had to protect Aemon, so I hoped I handled that well, as well as our first real introduction to Tormund, Ygritte, and the other Free Folk. Also, with the Wall
breached, the wildlings will indirectly undermine the Boltons' very shaky hold on the North, as we'll see later on.

And for those curious as to whether Robb was alive, here it is. I figured that Robb staying with his father's friend in the Vale would've worked and I hope that my explanation of how he was able to escape made sense. Yohn being a father figure to Sansa and Robb seemed fitting, and we will see more of Bronze Yohn vs Littlefinger (with the former causing more difficulty for Baelish than in the show). On another point, I felt that the mention of the Company of the Rose was needed, as Robb can't do much in Westeros anymore and he has to go elsewhere for help, just like Jon. Here's to hoping that Robb and Jon cross paths, each stronger than when they were just naive boys. For Sansa, I'm taking the book route (with a slight modification) rather than the BS one in the show, so no marriage to Ramsay (yay!).

From here, blood on all sides is guaranteed to spill. Fingers crossed.

(the song is "Practice Love" by JJ Lin)
"Tell me it's not true"

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys! Hope you are all safe and healthy as always.

This chapter was a bit of a struggle to write, but I hope it meets expectations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon read through the journal of Bloodraven for any pieces of wisdom left behind by the famed slayer of Daemon Blackfyre. After continuing with his investigation of the “disappeared brigades” and being informed of what his uncle Benjen learned from General Lim, he realized that the problem was much bigger than he had anticipated. So many army formations in the south existed only on paper and that left so much army supplies and coin unaccounted for. And the ones who helped facilitate that were either dimwitted or were in on it, the latter being the most logical conclusion. And Jon was not stupid in trying to go after the ones who benefitted, as they would most likely include powerful people throughout the empire, and they would not take kindly to his actions.

However, what really bothered Jon was how widespread the problem was. The northern army under Lord Joon was filled with professionals whose sole focus was to defend the empire and continue to perfect the art of war. But the south was devoid of such men, as army pay was not great and the opportunities for avarice were too tempting to resist. If he tried to move against those that lined their pockets with such actions, he would have made a lot more adversaries than he could handle.

Adding to his problems was that Arya was involuntarily involved with the seedier elements of Yin, with Jon discovering that all of the gangs answered to one man, who only went by the name “Wah.” Their activities included controlling brothels, fixing games that took place in gambling dens, forcing local shopkeepers to pay “protection” money, and smuggling through the ports. Word on the streets was that there were some from the capital constabulary were in his pockets and that he controlled the majority of all yapian, or opium, trade throughout the southern provinces. And Yujin was in league with them for reasons still unknown, even though Jon could only guess at some of them.

It showed Jon that for all of the empire’s advances and technological levels, greed was something that would never truly disappear. And those who profited would fight back, those more skilled at politicking and backstabbing than he was.

Coming across the first entry he saw, Jon read:

“Spring, two hundred and eleven years after Aegon’s Conquest,

*The Greyjoys have once again turned to reaving, inciting the rage of the Starks of Winterfell and the Lannisters of Casterly Rock. The places that reported attacks from the ironborn include the Stony Shore, Fair Isle, the Arbor, and the village of Little Dosk. Lord Beron Stark called his banners to repel the ironborn from the Stony Shore, which wouldn’t be a difficult given the numbers he has. The Lannisters have also restarted construction of a fleet to strike at the Iron Islands, and I have confidence that they would succeed.*
But I had advised Aerys the First of His Name to not intervene for the moment. While the Greyjoys’ actions merit some response from the crown, the ironborn reaving is hardly a serious issue. I instead advised him to let Lord Lannister, Lord Stark, and Lord Tyrell deal with the ironborn, while his focus should be on Tyrosh, where Aegor remained with the surviving sons of Daemon. Aerys agreed.

But of course, my advice was not well-received in court. The Great Spring Sickness has left many mistrustful of my intentions and they blame me and dear Shiera for all of the misfortunes that came with the drought. Given my baseborn status and due to Daemon’s actions, I am in no position to make more enemies than I already have.

It’s for this reason that I cannot respond to the request sent from Raventree Hall to intervene in the issue regarding the succession to Stone Hedge, as Ser Otho naturally presents a serious threat to the house of my mother. I might have the ability to help them, but that would damage my position because that would be what the others in court would expect and they would sneer, “A bastard might be greedy for power, but he would help his family at the expense of others.”

I personally did not care much for what other people felt, but prejudice would prevent me from doing a thousand goods while taking away the one good that I could do. My family was and is always House Targaryen and my first purpose is to ensure that they remain on the Iron Throne for as long as they could. Intervening on House Blackwood’s behalf regarding Ser Otho would jeopardize my purpose, so I must do nothing.

And it’s because of my decision was I able to remain in Aerys’ favor, and thus continue to advise him on the more dangerous threat from Aegor and the brood of the Blackfyres.

Jon rubbed his temples after setting down the journal. His first instinct after finding out about the “disappeared brigades” was to use his auditing power to have everyone arrested, but as he previously concluded, that would upset more than his share of powerful people.

But on a deeper level, Jon realized that if he made those in power upset, he would not be in a position to help himself and his family when they do have to return to Westeros. And he began to understand that to get things done, he had to sometimes work with those he wouldn’t stand to be around. Bloodraven learned to not allow his emotions to affect his judgment and Jon was going to learn just that.

As his mind wondered elsewhere, Jon held up the necklace of Shiera Seastar, reflecting on the ill-fated romance between her and Bloodraven. Shiera might have loved Bloodraven, but the circumstances of her birth and the periods that made up her life prevented her from fully giving her heart to anyone. She was the object of desire for Bittersteel, which added to the hatred between the two half-brothers, and there are those that said that such a conflict for a woman made the realm bleed.

At the same time, Jon thought that Shiera was also at fault. Bloodraven had proposed to her many times and she refused, not knowing that he loved her deeply and was willing to spend the rest of her life with her. In essence, she turned down love for power over men and yet Jon couldn’t blame her.

It made him wonder on how beautiful women shaped the course of history for better or worse. And he thought about the women that were currently visible to him.

He had heard tell of Daenerys from the others side of the Jade Gates and how she was dismantling slavery. However, there was talk that the slave masters were close to retaliating, since while her actions had noble intentions, everything in Slaver’s Bay was disrupted. Given what he had learned
from Bloodraven’s journal, he was tempted to criticize Daenerys’ actions because she didn’t plan ahead.

The other woman, Khiara, had long worked with those who were very willing to usurp her but whose partnership resulted in stability at court and throughout the empire. She turned down many marriage proposals, even with a man who she was previously fond of, because all of them came from families that sought power and influence on the phoenix throne. Because she was able to remain independent of those families and still be in the emperor’s favor, she obtained much influence in court and developed relationships with key individuals. Her policies allowed for the navy to continue to be expanded and received upgrades to their ships and weapons, the roads were maintained because she helped appoint an interior minister that would not be susceptible to bribes, and relations between the empire and the semi-autonomous island of Leng remained cordial because she kept the aggressive faction, which was controlled by the prime minister, at bay due to her hold over the fleet.

If one had to be objective, one would praise the achievements of Khiara, who did not seat on a throne, while criticizing Daenerys’ actions. However, Jon got to know Khiara from her many invitations to dinner and from how she kept watch over Arya’s training with the Jade Order. She might have done good, but Jon knew that she didn’t really care about anyone but herself. The only difference between her, Yujin, and Sumeng was that she didn’t allow her self-preservation instincts negatively affect others, and her “partners” only gave her more protection against those who sought to use her.

As Jon watched Meleys fly above his palace and rubbing Ghost’s snout, he thought about Daenerys, *If I had to be honest, I would have done the same thing regarding the erasure of slavery. No one should live in chains.*

What’s more, Daenerys possessed a certain strength that spoke to his heart, the type that showed that she would not compromise her beliefs and would stand by them when everyone told her not to. And that would be what Jon would adopt.

*Like her, I won’t let others determine what I should do and what I should believe. However, as I do so, I will use whatever methods they utilized to stay in power against them. I intend to show them that greed is nothing compared to strength and beliefs. The only issue left is, what sort of methods could I use?*

Suddenly, that’s when it dawned on Jon. He sent a message to Lord Buko’s adjutant, inviting him for afternoon tea on the morrow. The adjutant of the capital garrison told him that Lord Buko was very dissatisfied with the current state of things in the empire and grumbled whenever corruption occurred in his ranks. Given that the adjutant had Lord Buko’s ear, Jon thought, *He might be very interested in what I discovered regarding the disappeared brigades. I might not be in a position to effectively intervene, but he is.*

After sending the message to Lord Buko’s adjutant, Jon had the servants dress hims in his best armor, the golden jacket of the imperial guard, strap Longclaw to his back and Dark Sister to his waist. He would have done it himself, but he had to act the part of a prince and this came with allowing his servants what they were there to do. Today was a special day and he wanted to look great for Arya’s sake.

With Ghost and his entourage in tow, Jon walked to the compound of the Jade Order. As the members in the training yard bowed to him, he took his seat next to Princess Khiara’s, who would arrive soon.

Benjen was back in Yin as required of him being a vice minister of war and he wouldn’t miss this
day for Arya also. Dressed in Yi-Tish armor, he took his seat next to Jon as he was the oldest male relative of him and Arya. But what struck Jon was that he brought along a woman companion, a singer from what he was told. After performing before the troops at Si Qo and in his private chambers, Benjen and the woman, whose name was Mingyu, had grown close and his uncle could confidently say that he was courting her. *Between here and the Wall, Uncle Benjen is a completely different person,* he mused.

Next came Sam and Prince Kaijin, the latter of whom came because Sam was attending. Sam had just finished with his duties with the Grand Secretary and had dressed in rich silk robes. He was also accompanied by Lady Meiying Yoon, who he had invited. After the incident at the teahouse, Sam and Meiying were courting each other and they seemed to be happy.

Gendry also entered the courtyard. Having just completed training with the capital garrison, he was now assigned to their firearms unit and would now start preparing for the officer’s examination. But as he was still a common soldier, he had to stand and therefore was not given a seat. Jon persuaded his commanding officer to grant him a temporary leave, but he couldn’t violate conventions in the palace.

The last to appear was Sandor Clegane. Jon was informed by his physician, Jung-Hwa, that the Hound went through some tough times under her supervision. After being denied his regular supply of yapian, the Hound went through the symptoms that came with withdrawal. The first week was especially trying, as the first day saw the Hound vomit into several buckets and that dehydrated him. Then, his eyes and entire body were drenched in sweat, as the balance in the body that was maintained by the yapian had been disturbed. He also couldn’t move his arms, as he shouted, “It burns!” Other conditions that afflicted him were severe pain in his stomach, his heart rate was very fast, he couldn’t sleep for four nights, and he just couldn’t lie still. *All of that because he didn’t have yapian to smoke.*

After about a few weeks, Jung-Hwa was satisfied with how he was able to overcome his addiction. But the next stage of treatment was more difficult, as Sandor was hesitant to revealing all of the painful details of his life. He also didn’t want to go to the bathhouse, as he didn’t like the idea of being naked around other naked men and after finding out that fire warmed the baths. *Can’t blame him over there. Still haven’t went despite their popularity.*

Fortunately, Jung-Hwa decided to take the next stage of his treatment slowly and allowed Sandor to leave her place, but she also sent a message to the Imperial Physician, which required him to report to her once a week.

Sandor was dressed in Yi-Tish robes and wore a black hat so that the shadow casted could better cover the scars on his face. Even though he was a guest, he did not hold any importance yet and thus had to stand next to Gendry. *If he continues this way, I will give him work to do.*

To Jon’s surprise, Lord Joon and Hoon Ti had also appeared, both of them apologizing for showing up late. Jon nodded his thanks to his host and teacher for showing up.

The drums sounded as Khiara and her own entourage came forward, followed closely by Arya and her teacher Gong-Er. Both were dressed in the white silk gown and jade green shirts of the Jade Order. Even though Gong-Er was blind, she was able to find her way by tapping the ground with her cane and didn’t Arya to help her.

As for Arya, with her hair tied back and her face covered in white powder, Jon almost mistook her for one of the wooden dolls that he had seen in the market. But with a newfound confidence in her eyes and posture, Arya indeed reminded Jon of his dead mother, who everyone said was the fiercest woman of the North.
After completing her training under the tutelage of Gong-Er, Arya was going to be inducted into the Jade Order. It was a source of pride for all who had relations with her, as only a few completed the rigorous training. She, along with six other women, would take the oath of loyalty to Khiara and to the azure line before beginning what would be a long period of service protecting the princess.

Jon couldn’t be happier for Arya, as she would finally be around those who fit her idea of strong women and would be respected among her peers.

After Khiara sat down in her chair, Arya and the other five women knelt prostrate to the ground.

“Today is a glorious day, for we welcome six new sisters to the Jade Order,” Khiara announced. “For centuries, the Jade Order has protected the imperial family and helped secure the line of emperors by protecting those who couldn’t protect themselves. Many a time have the women of the Order distinguished themselves in the line of duty and we welcome them with open arms. And now, these women before me will now join the long and distinguished list of those who devoted their lives to the empire.”

At her signal, six maids came forward and unrolled green scrolls, which summarized the oaths that Arya and the others had to recite. But they would have to say them word for word, in front of everyone in the courtyard.

“We do solemnly affirm that we will support and defend the line of azure emperors against all of their enemies, foreign and domestic, real and imagined. We swear to bear true faith and allegiance to the same, and that we will obey the orders of the azure emperor and the princesses of his blood, and the orders of those appointed over us, in accordance to the imperial decree of the Jade Order put into effect by the seventh azure emperor!” they all proclaimed.

But that was not the end. Now, each one had to swear another oath, one that included their name. Arya was the one to go first.

“Here do I swear allegiance and service to the Golden Empire of Yi-Ti, and to Her Highness Princess Khiara Bu, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until Her Highness releases me, or death take me, or the world end. So have I spoken, Arya of House Stark, second daughter of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Warden and Lord Paramount of the North,” she proclaimed in guanhua. In the days since she arrived in the Golden Empire, her hold on the tongue had rapidly improved, but it still needed work.

Jon, Benjen, Sam, and Gendry were about to clap, but they put their hands down upon seeing the rest of the courtyard witnessing in solemn silence. The maid in front of Arya then rolled her scroll, turned around, tied it with a white string, and set it on the table in front of Khiara. The rest of the women soon followed by saying their personal oaths.

Once all said their vows, Arya and the five other women stood up, but they still averted their gaze.

As the teacher, Gong-Er brought forward a bowl of a specially mixed elixir that they had reserved for this occasion. Setting it down a lower table, the rest of the inducted members of the Jade Order lined up behind Gong-Er. To Jon’s surprise, Arya’s teacher unsheathed a knife from her waist and cut her palm, after which she squeezed her palm and let her blood drop into the elixir. The other women of the Jade Order, seventy in total, did as she did.

“With this release of blood from our sisters comes the ultimate expression of the bonds between each other. Upon their entry in your bodies, you will be forever bound to the Order and to each
other as sisters,” Khiara declared.

Arya stepped forward, grabbed onto the bowl and took a moment before drinking from it. She didn’t really know the taste of the blood, but the strong taste of the elixir masked it and she nearly coughed. But she swallowed and set the bowl back down on the table for the next woman to drink from it. Once they finished drinking, the maids returned and gave them a pair of swords, one short and a long one but they were both slightly curved. Forged with the best steel available besides Valyrian steel, Arya took them eagerly.

The induction was followed by a feast in the new members’ honor, where there was music, good food, and various performances. Jon clinked his cups with Lord Joon and Hoon and chuckled with Benjen, Sam, and Prince Kaijin. But seeing his uncle and friend with their own women to woo made Jon think of when he will have that chance, especially since Gendry clearly fancied Arya. *I might have to do something in order to make him more acceptable as a suitor for Arya.*

Upon thinking that, Jon’s thoughts turned to Daenerys, who was undeniably beautiful. And him moving on from Chanhee made his thoughts turn to his aunt. He knew that romantic bonds within the family was one of the things that defined House Targaryen and if he had to admit, the feelings that he had for Chanhee had now transferred to her. He understood that no one was meant to be alone forever, and Daenerys might be the one he could very well end up with. *But how and when is the question,* he pondered. *Might be something to think more about it when I do leave this place.*

“You should be proud of your sister, Prince Daeron,” Khiara said to him. “Only a few women can join the Jade Order, and she is the first white devil to do so.”

“I am very much so, Princess Khiara,” Jon responded. “She came a long way from when she was still struggling under Lady Catelyn.”

“Who was one of the casualties of the Red Wedding back in Westeros, right?”

Jon had to stifle tears at the Red Wedding, since Robb was one of those that was reported dead. “Yes. But to be frank with you, I didn’t feel anything for Catelyn.”

“Why would you? She treated you very badly and you had no blood connection to her, so you had nothing to mourn for.”

Jon nodded. “You are very right.”

“I was told by Gong-Er that your sister has a lot of anger in her, which would be useful when she is faced with adversity. She also told me that one of her nicknames was ‘Underfoot.’ What does that mean?” Khiara asked.

Jon gulped. *Arya, why did you reveal that?* “She got that name because she was always getting in the way of the household at Winterfell and she didn’t allow her position as Ned Stark’s duty to stop her from making friends wherever she went.”

“Oh,” Khiara nodded in understanding. “She’s one of those outgoing sorts, where she would have no problem drinking with commoners when the chance allows. Is that right?”

“She would do that,” Jon admitted.

“And that’s why she made friends with the lowborn bastard, even though he does have a drop of dragon blood in him courtesy of Rhaelle Targaryen,” Khiara assessed.

Jon stopped himself from shaking his head. *‘Underfoot’ held a lot of intimate meaning for the*
family at Winterfell and for Khiara to even hear of that meant that she was becoming more invasive in their past.

“Prince Daeron, I know that you don’t plan to be in the empire forever, but what is your plan in getting the help you require? To take a throne, you need money and soldiers. You don’t have enough of the former and you certainly don’t have enough clout to get much of the latter,” Khiara pointed out.

Jon had to keep it close, but he knew that Khiara would sense a lie, so he went for the old tactic of half-truths. “The only way that I can see myself with an army is through hiring those to fight for me, but I am hesitant in employing sellswords since they only follow the coin.”

“Sellswords are not the only soldiers you can get,” Khiara answered in response. “You already have a few who would join you, particularly that zorseman you have in your household.”

“A few Jogos Nhai might not be enough,” Jon told her.

“There might be some who will be willing to find the men for you, at a price,” Khiara said.

Jon looked at her, unsure. “Who do you mean?”

Khiara leaned back against her chair. “Greed can be useful, especially when it comes to the merchants. For a long time, the empire sought trade routes to Westeros that didn’t go past Qarth, as the Qartheans charge a huge markup for our goods to pass by there. You could offer them the opportunity to make lucrative trade deals in exchange for financing your claim. The lords of the empire are not the only people you could reach out to if you require manpower.”

Jon thought about this. He found the company of merchants distasteful, as the only thing that they were loyal to was coin. However, the merchants in the empire did have control over a large portion of the money in circulation and many at court had some relationship with what they called “merchant slime.” At the same time, wars cost money and he’ll need a lot of it if he wanted to be successful in his eventual war on the Baratheons and Lannisters. Who shall I approach first?

The final part of the festivities had the new members perform a dance in front of the guests. Jon and Benjen leaned forward, eager to see Arya do one of the things that she loathed doing as a child.

The six women arranged in a circular fashion that resembled a cherry blossom, accomplished with fans. The drums started to be pounded on, with each strike determining the rhythm of the performance. And they all moved in conjunction with another, their formation separating like petals falling off of the blossom. All of their movements were graceful and yet there was a power behind each of them, a type that couldn’t be shown with pure brawn.

All Jon could focus on was Arya, who moved with such fluidity and focus that he forgot that she had never learned to dance well in Winterfell. But here she was, giving a mesmerizing performance that would make any man drool over her. The white powder on her face, her reddened lips, her eyes lined with black, and her hair tied up in an elaborate style while spinning around with her fan… I did not expect this side of Arya to show up.

Jon then glanced at Gendry, who was still standing but he couldn’t keep his eyes off of Arya. And his were very wide, almost as if he was staring at a goddess. Might have to talk to him about what he plans to do with Arya.

The six women spun around one last time before kneeling down and outstretching their arms. Jon had lost track, as he was looking at Arya for so long that he didn’t realize how short it was. But he
could see sweat emerging on Arya’s face. *Didn’t know dancing could be so strenuous.*

Khiara stood up from her seat and opened her mouth as if to give her final congratulations to the women, but the front doors of the courtyard suddenly burst open, catching everyone’s attention.

In came Prince Yujin, with twenty men armed with swords and spears. As they formed up behind Yujin, all of the guests murmured with each other at this intrusion.

“What do you want, Yujin?” Khiara was also angry at her half-brother daring to barge in while armed.

“My quarrel is not with you, Khiara. It is with the white trash that stands before me, her family, and her companions,” Yujin pointed to Arya, Gendry, Sandor, Jon, Benjen, and Sam.

“How dare you enter this place!” Lord Joon stood up in anger. “You are not welcome here!”

“I am a prince of the empire, Lord Joon, and therefore of higher rank. You do not talk back to me like we’re equals,” Yujin hissed.

“Then allow me, brother,” Kaijin rose up. “This ceremony celebrates the inclusion of new members of the Jade Order and you were not invited.”

“Oh, is that what she is now?” Yujin scoffed. “She’s doesn’t like Jade Order to me. She instead looks like a piece of meat, as does her bastard friend and scarred brute. And they have a debt to pay.”

“Whatever debts you think she owes, they have no place here,” Benjen defended his niece. “And she will never bow to the demands of scum like you!”

“Ah, the good uncle. Best be careful with your words, unless you want to end up like your dumb brother,” Yujin gave him a sick smile.

Jon snapped at that last one, as Yujin extinguished his patience after trying to go after his sister and then insulting the man who was like a father to him. He rose up from his chair, circled around the table and stood between Yujin and Arya.

“You know. Now that I think of it, I always hear you talking, and others talking about you. I even saw you kicking my sister in the stomach, while you had her restrained,” Jon spoke. Benjen rose in anger at the revelation of Yujin striking his niece while Gendry grounded his teeth, his eyes wanting to murder him. Even Khiara groaned in disgust, as there was nothing admirable about hitting someone who couldn’t fight back. “But… the more I think about it, the more I am beginning to believe that you are all talk and not action. How about you back that up, you son of bitch?” he challenged.

Yujin laughed at him. “You really think that you have a chance against me?”

“For someone trained by an assassin, you sure talk a lot. Show me,” Jon spat.

Benjen moved to protest Jon’s decision, but Lord Joon looked at him and shook his head. As for Khiara, she remained silent, eager to see what would come. Arya and Sam looked on with fear, as this was the first time that they saw Jon fight someone who was too eager to draw blood.

“All right. But your white pet doesn’t get involved,” Yujin pointed to Ghost, who really wanted to tear into him. “This fight is between you and me.”
Jon looked to Ghost, silently telling him to sit back and not intervene. Reluctantly, Ghost sat.

Without a word but giving another grin, Yujin unsheathed his swords and readied himself while Jon unsheathed Longclaw and threw off his golden jacket. They circled each other, Longclaw and Yujin’s katana drawn and ready to fight.

Then, Yujin let go a furious yell that could be heard throughout the courtyard and charged at Jon. He was ready for it and easily stepped aside and lay his Valyrian steel across his back. For one brief moment, everyone thought it was over, but Yujin whipped back around, as his robe was only cut and not his flesh. *He moves fast.*

After that he was more cautious and the two combatants circled each other, looking for an opening, as the crowd looked. Arya felt Gendry stand next to her and she held his arm tightly as the two clashed their swords together and the steel ringing loudly. Yujin’s swipes were much faster than Jon’s, while Jon had more strength. Yujin’s move resembled a dance from how fluidly he moved while Jon learned more practical moves. As they struck against one another, Jon sought an opening…and then he found one.

Yujin attempted to jump and spin around to kick Jon, but he saw that coming and easily avoided it. Jon then sliced his sword up his tricep, causing him to hold it in pain. Arya, along with everyone, could hear him cry out as bright red blood streamed down the back of his arm and onto his hand.

Arya knew it was not over yet. Yujin stepped backwards towards one of the tables while keeping his sword aimed at Jon. He stalked him as if he was hunting, his sword out, his stout body in a crouch, both hands on Longclaw’s hilt, ready to attack and defend himself. Suddenly, Jon struck and their swords clashed. The force from his attacks forced Yujin to collide into a table, the teacups and ceramic plates clinking as they shook from the impact.

Then Arya saw it, saw Yujin take his left hand from his sword’s hilt and grab a teapot. As it was open, he threw all of its contents to Jon.

"JON! LOOK OUT!" she shouted.

But it was too late, as Yujin’s teapot move went faster than her words and towards his face.

Jon cried out in pain, his skin slightly peeling and his face stinging from the burning feeling of the hot tea water. Jon staggered back as an awful gasp came from the audience. He shook his head furiously and tried to wipe the spilled tea from his face, but he staggered some more. Yujin used the opportunity to stride towards Jon, finally confident in a victory.

"Let’s see you bleed, dragon!" he shouted and then, he laughed, and his thick lips formed an evil leer.

Jon tried to rub his eyes with his hands, but they were needed to hold Longclaw. He swung it blindly, shaking his head and blinking, trying to clear his eyes and shake off the pain, and Yujin easily stepped out of the way of Longclaw. More than one voice whispered against Yujin for his cheap move, but the challenge had to continue.

Yujin exploited Jon’s blinking to strike Longclaw away from his hand. The Valyrian steel clanged against the ground and thus allowing him to whirl around him and slash at his back.

Everyone gasped at seeing the deep cut, which caused Jon to stagger more and then kneel on the ground. Yujin moved on Jon, wanting to see more blood judging from his crazed eyes, but Jon responded quickly enough by rolling to his side and standing back up, gritting his teeth in pain.
while unsheathing Dark Sister.

Yujin moved to stab him in the waist, but Jon caught his sword with Dark Sister’s hilt. He then brought his hilt up and struck Yujin hard on the forehead, stunning him. Now wanting to return the favor, Jon slashed across his thighs. They weren’t deep enough to touch bone, but they allowed much blood to exit it and effectively making his legs useless.

Yujin cried out in pain as he fell to the ground on his knees and Jon was tempted to cut him some more. But deciding to really get the message across, he dropped Dark Sister and tackled him against the courtyard’s stone. He threw punches at his face and saw him bleed, but for the insults against Arya and Ned Stark, he wasn’t going to stop there.

Unfortunately, he felt more than a pair of strong arms pull him off of Yujin. He looked around and saw Lord Joon and Prince Kaijin hold him while Yujin’s guards got him back up.

Before Jon did anything else, Khiara walked from her chair and went between them. “I think that’s enough, you two. And we both know who won.”

“We’re not done yet,” Yujin cried out, only for Khiara to slap him hard across the face.

“I said, enough,” Khiara warned him. “Or should I tell the emperor of what you tried to do? Given your history, he won’t take well to you drawing your weapons during a sacred ceremony.” She turned to his guards. “Get him out of here.”

As the guards helped Yujin out of the courtyard, Jon fainted from the sheer exhaustion of the fight, almost bested by the psychotic prince.

When he came to, he was lying on a floor mat, with his back exposed. Glancing up, he saw Khiara applying some balm to the cut on his back.

“What happened?” Jon asked.

“You passed out, which was understandable given how much you gave against Yujin,” Khiara continued applying the balm.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in my quarters.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “Why did you bring me here?”

“I took you first to the imperial physician. After listening to his recommendations, I told him that I would apply this balm myself. You can go in the morning,” Khiara answered.

“But why did you bring me here?”

“Figured that I won’t get a lot of chances to be around you in this setting,” Khiara admitted.

Jon knew there was something more. “Why take the trouble healing me?”

“Is there something wrong with a princess looking over a prince?” she asked suggestively.

“No, but—”

“Shhh,” Khiara shushed him before leaning to whisper in his ear. “I’ve been wanting to see someone finally put that shit in his place. If it weren’t for his blood, he’d just be another thug. To
see you beat him at his own game and without your direwolf and dragon, all because you sought to
defend your family… if your actions do not constitute a model of honor and loyalty, I don’t know
what will.”

“But you don’t care about that,” Jon told her straight.

“No,” Khiara acknowledged. “But it’s still refreshing to see after all of the backstabbing that is
happening. Now, hold still.”

Jon felt some discomfort as she turned him on his back and was now applying the balm on his face.

“It’s not serious. You can still be a comely man,” Khiara smiled at him. “Otherwise, we may not
drink tea as often.”

Jon slightly shook under her touch. There was something in her fingers that seemed to explore his
back and then his face. It was as if Khiara was using this time to closely examine him, as if
examining a cheongja. He didn’t like to be seen as a fine object and despite Khiara’s good
intentions, he wanted nothing more than to just leave her as fast as he can.

But then, Jon looked into her eyes and saw something that he never thought to see. It was a look
that he had seen in Chanhee and then Daenerys, a look that resulted from true concern for his well-
being. More seriously, that look resembled Daenerys’ in that it seemed as if Khiara was attracted to
him. The last possibility frightened him, as Khiara being smitten could lead to some dangerous
results.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe here.” For good measure, Khiara moved down and kissed his forehead.
Not a deep kiss, but one given as reassurance. Standing up, she left Jon alone to rest. “I’ll see you
in the morning, Daeron,” she gave him one more smile.

Blinking, Jon knew that sort of kiss would only come out of pure concern, which stumped him
more. For a brief moment, he saw Khiara not as a princess willing to do what she needed to do to
survive and gain power, but as another woman who wanted to take care of someone she had grown
to really like. Given her beauty, it wouldn’t be hard for Jon to fall for her, as she also had enormous
strength and an indomitable will, both shaped from adversity like Daenerys’.

Jon softly groaned. Why am I feeling this way? Please let me see what’s true and what’s not, he
pray to his father, mother, and uncle.

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Hudam Shu convened his most influential supporters under his roof. Besides the Economics
Minister and Lord Dao, they included the Captain-Generals of the Southwest and Southeast
Armies, both of whom were appointed to represent the ninety of the two hundred generals of the
army that were on the Prime Minister’s side, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Rites, the
Minister of Personnel, and the Minister of Works. Also in attendance was Yuejo Chin, the master
of the merchants guild in Yin and the appointed representative of the merchant communities in the
southern provinces. In summary, a majority of the army generals, four out of nine imperial
ministers, the most influential merchant in the empire, and the most powerful of the southern
nobility had received and answered his invitation.

After the traditional feast and music and dance performances, Hudam had his servants lock the
room and the guards to stand a few feet away from the main area. He knew for certain that his
adversaries, particularly Princess Khiara, had spies in his household and he couldn’t risk tipping his
hand to her, not while so much was at stake.
“Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming here today,” Shu started. “For the past twenty years, we have been tied together with the bonds of comradeship and mutual interest and there is no one in this room who hasn’t benefited from our close cooperation. We have also helped ensure stability in the empire, as the bureaucracy has been maintained and the balance of power has been protected. But recent events have threatened that balance and thus jeopardizing our partnerships. I have invited you all today so that we can hear each other’s grievances and come up with solutions to safeguard our interests. I will open the floor to discussion.”

Shu poured himself another cup of tea as the first one, the Minister of Works, began. “Gentlemen, I hear talk of how Daeron Targaryen and his uncle Benjen Stark have been snooping around our sources of income. How did that happen?”

“He is the assistant quartermaster of the capital garrison, Minister,” the Justice Minister told him. “It’s his duty to go through the books and investigate. But given his honorable demeanor, it was bound to happen.”

“The only reason why he has any power is because of his dragon. Without it, he’s just another nobody,” one of the generals sneered.

“Which is more than what you could say for yourself,” Yuejo Chin answered. “I might be merchant slime, but you call yourself a soldier? You wanted to make more money because the army doesn’t pay you well, even though your first loyalty is to the emperor.”

“You calling me a whore, you merchant shit?” the general was offended.

“He does have a point,” the Economics Minister joined in. “This is why we civil servants look down on you soldiers. The only reason why you’re all generals in the first place is because we allowed it to happen. But you will always take orders from us, because that is the nature of your chosen profession.”

“You seem to forget that without us, your word won’t mean anything in the provinces,” another general shot back. “You are just a paper pusher while we have to risk our lives and keep order in the lands where we help keep the peace.”

“You’re just soldiers. Who are you to say what we should do and whether our word means anything?” the Minister of Personnel spat.

Shu sighed as the discussion became a simple exchange of insults. He wasn’t personally involved in the corruption that was going on, as his lands gave him an income that was more than enough for him to live comfortably and give him some bargaining power when it came to making connections. However, rather than not associating himself with officials he knew were greedy, he thought it better to instead get their cooperation and find ways to control them. He remembered what his father said about corruption after the emperor threatened to investigate him:

“Some commissioner from some backwater post, trying to investigate me at the behest of the emperor? Make a name for himself? Maybe become a minister and get lands and a subsidy so that the other officials in court can suddenly start having, at our family’s expense, all the advantages we enjoy currently and have been for centuries? No, I tell you, my son. No! Corruption charges against me and my friends! Corruption? Corruption is intrusion into how us officials maintain order in the empire in the form of commissioners trying to tell us what to do. The emperor might not know this, and his lackeys have less understanding than he does, but this empire has laws against those types of interference precisely so we can get away with it. They just need to look closely at the details and really understand the ambiguities. Corruption is our protection. Corruption keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are able to live in our house and
on our lands instead of fighting over scraps of meat out in the streets. Corruption is what maintains empires. Corruption is why we win.”

Naïve as he was, Shu took his father’s words to heart. While he was not engaged in corruption, he would do nothing against it. And he saw that the benefits outweighed the damage it might have caused. *I allow the officials to become greedy, I in turn control the debt they accumulate. Control the debt, and I control everything.* That was one of the reasons that he entered into a partnership with Chin, as he could influence how much money could pass through him and to whom he gave it to. The price was that he had to turn an occasional blind eye to Chin’s more questionable practices, which included smuggling illegal items and selling them to the underground.

After the discussion was going nowhere, Shu slammed his hand down. *They might be officials, but they are just dogs to me. And I am their master.* As if proving his thoughts, they all became silent.

“I did not invite you all here to throw personal attacks at each other, so I’ll just remind you all very clearly. What should we do about Daeron Targaryen? He’s becoming more dangerous especially with Princess Khiara taking on the role as his benefactor. Besides his uncle, Joon Kitara is not someone we should ignore, as he has influence over the northern armies. He’s clearly not the type we want in power for long, so any suggestions on how to deal with him?”

“Your Excellency,” Lord Dao made his presence known. “We currently cannot confront Daeron Targaryen directly, as that would put us in conflict with Princess Khiara and her faction. Might I suggest a more roundabout way of damaging him?”

“And what would that be, my lord?” Shu inquired.

“We all have heard of Daenerys Targaryen and her actions west of the Jade Gates,” Lord Dao brought up. “Noble as her intentions may be in eliminating slavery and even though the empire doesn’t practice slavery, what she did destabilized the fragile steadiness that was formed the exchange of live beings in bondage. I heard talk from traders from Qarth about how the drastic elimination of slavery led to many things such as the devaluation of live men and women on the market, shipwrights who could no longer find clients because they only built slave transports, and many brokers who provided for the fighting pits cannot find additional business.”

“So, what’s your point?” Shu knew all of that and didn’t need to be reminded.

“We’re ignoring a potential ally in the slave masters. I suggest we contact the disaffected in Slaver’s Bay and find ways to help them sabotage Daenerys Targaryen,” Lord Dao suggested. “As Prince Daeron is also a Targaryen, anything that could set back and damage Daenerys will affect him also.”

“And what ways do you think he’ll be damaged?” Shu became very interested.

“The words of House Targaryen are ‘Fire and Blood.’ Perhaps it’s time that we remind the people how much destruction was caused in the name of the dragons.”

Shu blinked in thought. The more he thought about it, the more he concluded that Lord Dao’s suggestions were the most viable offered that day. His thoughts were shared with the rest who gathered, who slowly nodded their heads in agreement.

“Chin,” Shu turned to the master of the merchants’ guild. “Can you get into contact with the slave masters?”

“I’ll have to send an intermediary through Qarth, but it is possible.”
“Do it. And have one of your men personally go to Slaver’s Bay to assess the situation. Once there, have him send regular reports and recommendations on who to approach,” Shu directed.

“It will be done, Your Excellency,” Lord Dao bowed.

“Minister,” Shu turned to the Minister of Justice. “You have control over the capital constabulary and all other public security formations throughout the empire. Work with Lord Dao’s son to have the Central Column and other constables who work out of uniform to keep watch on Daeron Targaryen, Benjen Stark, Arya Stark, Samwell Tarly, the bastard Gendry, and the scarred brute. Have them report closely on their activities, especially regarding Daeron’s and Benjen’s investigations.”

“Should they come close to the truth, Your Excellency?” the Minister asked with some apprehension.

“Use your imagination,” Shu scolded him. But it also gave him some deniability should things go wrong.

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Also,” Shu turned to the generals. “Arrange for your provosts to watch Joon Kitara, General Buko, and Admiral Okamoto. For those that bear arms that do not stand with us, they are now our enemies. Be vigilant and respond accordingly should they contrarily to our expectations.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” the generals affirmed.

“One last thing, Minister,” he turned to the Minister of Personnel. “Make inquiries to the Grand Secretariat on texts regarding dragons. As their existence was well recorded, there must be some way to counter them should the need arise.”

“As you wish, Your Excellency.”

Shu raised his teacup, with the others following. “Let’s do this right, gentlemen. The fate of the empire is in our hands. We should keep it that way.”

Rhaenys thrust her spear at the dummy in the training area of her host’s house. She then spun the spear around and used the sharpened head to cut across the dummy. Finally, she used the blunt sides of her spear to strike the dummy’s head, imagining it as a move that would stun her mark. She repeated those movements over and over, remembering what her Dornish teacher taught her. But as she had no one to spar with, all she could do was practice routines for the moment.

One habit she developed while training with the Dornish spear and scimitar was to practice all morning without break, pushing herself to strike harder and faster than the previous day. After she had her noon meals, she would study and go over the occurrences from all over the known world. She then finished each day with more combat training, but without her weapons. Her Dornish teacher taught her how to use her hands and legs, since he said that there will be times when she will have to kill using her limbs.

Seeing the sundial mark noon, she set down her spear and went to eat. Most of the household just passed by her, with few bowing their heads, as they were not accustomed to bowing before anyone but the slave masters. She found Varys sitting across her at the table, but he was not eating.

“Your Grace,” he addressed with respect. “I assume your morning training has been productive?”

“Quite,” Rhaenys was terse with her words.

“After you’ve finished with your meal, Your Grace, please join me for an important meeting. It’ll help determine the future and greatly help you on the way to the throne,” Varys told her.

“Who?” Rhaenys drank from her goblet.

“Someone from past the Bone Mountains, but one who is well-connected to the workings of the group that I intend to cooperate with,” Varys was vague on the details.

“If you say so,” Rhaenys proceeded to eat.

Although she was just a small child, she knew exactly where she came from and who her parents were. She remembered her father’s soft touch and how he made her smile, her mother giving her many kisses and allowing her to hold her baby brother, and the days she spent running around the Red Keep without a care in the world. Little did she experience the madness that came from her grandsire the Mad King and she could only imagine how much her parents and her grandmother protected her from it.

Rhaenys remembered waking up in the sands of Dorne one time and at a place people called the Tower of Joy. She didn’t understand what was happening, but she could remember seeing a northern woman there and how kind she was to her. The only things that marked her identity was the direwolf sigil and a set of mismatched armor, suggesting that she was a Stark. What really confused her was how that Stark lady, her father, and her mother were all in the same bed. If only I knew that would be the only time that I saw Lyanna Stark, she thought.

When the Rebellion began, Aerys called them back and had her mother, herself, and her baby brother confined to their quarters. When things began to really turn bad for House Targaryen after her father was killed at the Trident, Rhaenys recalled being woken up in the middle of the night and led down a dark and damp tunnel towards a small boat. The man that led her through those tunnels under the Red Keep was none other than Varys, who promised her, “You need to leave first. I’ll get your brother.”

For the next twenty years, Rhaenys lived in one of the pillow houses of Lys, living among other women who gave their bodies for coin. As she grew older, her caretakers told her that she was the most beautiful women they had seen, a fine combination of Valyrian and Dornish beauty. However, she was not made a pillow slave, which confused her given where she was.

Varys revealed that he had paid the pillow house to keep her maidenhead intact, but Rhaenys asked, “With what money?” Whatever the costs were, it was certainly beyond Varys’ personal means, so there had to be something else going on. But Varys was tight-lipped, telling her to trust him. How could I even though he saved my life?

Another thing that Varys was tight-lipped about was when she could see her baby brother. All the Spider said was that for both of their safety, they had to be separated, but he praised his comeliness, his education, and his training and promised that when the time was right, they’ll meet each other again. You already made one promise, but you didn’t keep that one.

And now, after so many years, Varys had informed her that the time was right for her and her baby brother to press their claim on the Iron Throne, as the Baratheons and Lannisters had brought destruction to Westeros. But he also said that there were other threats to be dealt with, ones he called “pretenders to the throne.” When Rhaenys asked, Varys said that it was her aunt Daenerys
and her other brother Daeron, who he called a bastard born from Lyanna Stark’s womb.

Rhaenys wasn’t sure what to make of both of them, as she only heard a little of her aunt and none of her brother. However, despite the kindness that Lyanna Stark showed her, in her heart, she placed a little blame on her for the Rebellion. At the same time, she was not comfortable with confronting her family, given that she had to grow up alone and surrounded by those who didn’t really care for her.

Rhaenys didn’t know why she was in the pleasure houses, but she witnessed the scum of man take their sickened desires out on the woman they paid for. Many times, she heard moans, but occasionally, she heard screams. And she observed some of the women being sent there in chains, clearly being forced into servitude. But as much as she wanted to, there was nothing she could do. And that pissed her off, because she was of royal blood and that had to mean something. But alas, the Targaryen name meant shit in Lys, as poor old Saera Targaryen and Viserys the Second of His Name learned the hard way.

And even though she had good memories of her mother, father, and Lyanna Stark giving her love from that one time at the Tower of Joy, she didn’t have the time to really mourn them. One wrong move on her part and one moment of weakness would unleash the pleasure house owners on her, as they circled around all of the woman like vultures and they wouldn’t care how much Varys was paying them to leave her alone.

Of course, her witnessing Varys’ untrustworthiness prevented her from showing her true thoughts and she decided to mask her distrust of him by acting dignified and keeping an emotional distance. Only after I see my brother will I change my mind about him. But will he recognize me?

Rhaenys was hopeful to see her baby brother again, imagining him to be a strong man who knew how to handle himself well and a spitting image of their father. Of course, that was only a hope and that’s what tore at her heart, as she didn’t even know what to believe anymore. Varys says that my brother is the true heir, but there’s two other Targaryens running around if the rumors are true and the Baratheons are in control. And all I experienced so far was people caring for me because of my blood. What’s there to believe anymore?

She had only heard tell of her aunt Daenerys and what she had done, but she so far felt nothing. If she was my aunt, why did she leave me here among these people? Why didn’t she try hard enough to find me? And she was proclaiming herself a queen, making her believe that the crown was more important than her family. Is that who she really is?

And given her distrust of Varys, she didn’t know if she could trust what he said about Daeron, otherwise known as Jon Snow. What if he really is a bastard of Ned Stark, the wolf traitor, and Varys is just trying to make me more confused and giving me false hope? If it was true, given how he was the product of the union that caused the Rebellion in the first place, Rhaenys couldn’t find it in her to be happy that a third of her family might be alive. If he was who claimed to be, why didn’t he try to find me like Daenerys? Why did leave me be?

After eating her noon meal in silence, Rhaenys followed Varys to another part of the manse in Tols, where a strange looking man was seated. Dressed in silk robes and his hair tied in a bun, he didn’t look like he was from the Slaver’s Bay or any other place she was familiar with.

“Good afternoon, good ser,” Varys greeted him in the common tongue. “Are you comfortable speaking in the common tongue? If not, I can switch to High Valyrian.”

“The common tongue is fine,” the stranger replied back, but with an incredibly thick accent. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”
“No, thank you for reaching out,” Varys sat down across the strange man, with Rhaenys sitting next to him. “So, how are things back in the land of a thousand cities?”

“Much tension in the air, my lord. My masters are especially anxious about the current situation in the empire.”


“Yes. I am a native of Jinqi and have traveled past the Jade Gates, making a stop at Qarth, before making my way here to Tolos,” the Yi-Tish man said.

“How did you know how to reach out to us?” Rhaenys inquired.

“Daenerys Targaryen left behind much dissatisfaction in Qarth and one of them told me to look for the Harpy. As I searched Astapor and Yunkai, I was approached by some of Lord Varys’ little birds and they took me here. That’s just the simple version and I don’t think we have the time for the details,” the Yi-Tish man divulged.

“Of course,” Varys nodded. “May I ask who exactly your masters are, and why you have approached us?”

The Yi-Tish man took a moment to process that before finding the words. “I currently serve at the behest of the Prime Minister of the Golden Empire, Hudam Shu. I don’t work for him directly, but I take orders from Yuejo Chin, the master of the merchants’ guild. They have been running into some problems with Daeron Targaryen, as he is upsetting the balance of power in the empire and they naturally want to find solutions to control him.”

Rhaenys glanced at Varys, shocked that another person besides Varys talked about her supposed brother Daeron. If he knows about him, then that means that my brother is real, and alive, she thought with happiness, but her mistrust of Varys grew.

“I would assume,” Varys agreed. “And given that he was raised by an honorable man, he must be annoying many people.”

“Exactly,” the Yi-Tish man bobbed his head. “But I have to ask. Are you currently in a position next to Daenerys Targaryen? The Prime Minister wants to see if there is a way to damage her, as that would also indirectly damage Prince Daeron.”

“At the moment, I don’t,” Varys admitted. “But I do know someone else who is in her circle and I have a solution that would take care of her before she becomes too much of a threat.”

“And what would that be, if I may ask?”

“A rival claimant to her throne, and the Golden Company,” Varys stated.

The Yi-Tish man’s eyes widened, for he obviously had heard of the Golden Company’s reputation. “And who is this claimant?”

“Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia Martell. And next to me is his older sister, Rhaenys,” Varys introduced her.

“Ah,” the Yi-Tish man said aloud. “So, your plan is to challenge Daenerys Targaryen by presenting a male heir, hoping that her supporters would come to him because they won’t follow a woman? And the Golden Company would provide the muscle?”
“Not just the Golden Company,” Varys spoke. “The Harpies and the slave masters will provide the majority of the strength needed for this plan to work.”

“And you are in contact with this Harpy?”

“Correct.”

“You sure that this Aegon Targaryen is the genuine article? I heard the stories also.”

Varys paused. “He is. I have someone who can confirm.”

But that pause made Rhaenys really suspicious, but she kept it hidden. *What’s going on, Varys? Why did you hesitate?*

“How soon will you be able to strike against Daenerys Targaryen?”

“Soon. Which brings me to ask you. What will the Prime Minister offer us? He seeks to damage Daeron and I have the means to destroy Daenerys, so how could he help us achieve our goals?”

“I will have to contact Yuejo Chin and inform him of your plans and what you have at your disposal,” the Yi-Tish man replied. “From there, they’ll send me the details and we can plan together.”

“Sounds acceptable,” Varys smiled before they bowed to each other. “I invite you to stay here and enjoy our hospitality. Shall I arrange for a gift to be sent to your chambers?”

“I gladly accept,” the Yi-Tish man knew exactly what Varys meant and was escorted by servants to where he would sleep.

“So, you intend to harm my family in order for me and brother to claim the throne? Is that it?”

Rhaenys asked pointedly.

“The Targaryens and Blackfyres both have the blood of Aegon the Conqueror, but that didn’t stop them from killing each other over the Iron Throne. You might have to live with being a kinslayer, but worse has been committed for crowns,” Varys told her straight. “Wouldn’t that be what your parents wanted? You and your brother on the throne after so long? It will be a shame if your song ended with you in the ground as another pretender, and I shall prevent that from happening.”

Rhaenys’ face was blank, but she merely nodded, and both went their separate ways in the manse.

Once she practiced her punches and kicks with the same dummy after dinner, which lasted until after dusk, Rhaenys withdrew to her chambers and fell asleep. She had trouble sleeping for many years now and only hard exercise exhausted her to the point where she could rest with ease. Many thoughts and worries were in her mind and she didn’t want to spend most of the day dealing with them.

*But as she slept, she felt her mind drift elsewhere, towards the ocean. When her mind cleared, she found herself on the deck of a ship.*

*The ship was empty, devoid of its crew, and all she could hear was winds blowing and sails creaking against the wood. Looking around, she saw nothing but miles of endless sea, the blue glistening against the sunlight.*

*But when she blinked, she was no longer on the ship again, but in a mountain pass. There were corpses lying all around here, all of them having signs of being killed in battle from their cuts and*
the flies and crows flying above them. The stench of rotting flesh made her cover her nose and almost vomit as she tried to make her way through and onto the mountainside.

Climbing upward, she suddenly heard a shriek that made a tiger’s roar be insignificant. Looking around in the sky, her eyes widened at the sight above her. She saw a group of four dragons circling each other, one black, one white, one green, and one red. The dragon was the symbol of her house and to see them alive in this place made her smile.

But then, a fifth dragon joined them, or so it would seem. It turned out to be either a wyrm or a wyvern, as the creature might have looked like a dragon, but it couldn’t breath fire. Expectantly, the creature was devoured and burned very quickly. But the corpse was falling where she stood.

Acting quickly, she got out of the way and the corpse just missed falling on her. Landing on her ass, she stood back up slowly and tried to examine the dead dragon imposter. But there wasn’t much to examine, as it was badly burnt, its wings ripped to pieces, and the smell… awful.

Looking back up, she saw the black and red dragons descend to where she was. Shifting backwards, she steeled herself when both of them roared at her before clawing their way to her. They then stopped just within arm’s reach, but instead of a malicious growl, they were calm and only looked at her with some curiousness. Deciding to take the initiative, Rhaenys slowly walked forward and reached out with her hands. When her fingers touched both of their snouts, their eyes changed, and their growls turned into purrs.

Rhaenys smiled and giggled, liking the touch of dragons. But sensing someone was watching her, she looked up past their spines and saw two riders staring.

The rider of the black dragon had the traditional Valyrian looks, silver hair and amethyst eyes, and looked younger than her. The rider of the red dragon had black hair and grey eyes, traits of the First Men. But both looked beautiful and gave off that dangerous impression only earned by mastering dragons.

From those traits alone, Rhaenys figured that she was staring at Daenerys and Daeron Targaryen. Just like her, they were as confused as she was when they looked at her. They didn’t expect a Dornishwoman with purple eyes to touch their dragons so easily.

“Why did you kill that creature?” Rhaenys pointed to the wyvern.

“It tried to take what was ours,” Daenerys told her. “So, we had to kill it.”

“Who are you?” Daeron asked her.

But before she could answer, she felt the dream disappearing and the dragons and the riders fading. “I am the blood of the dragon,” she managed before they disappeared completely.

Rhaenys rose up, panting hard at the dream. She rubbed her forehead, finding sweat there. Finding her sheets also wet, she got out and walked towards the balcony, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

She had heard about such things, as only those with dragon blood could have them. But she never thought that she could have the thing that made Daenys Targaryen the savior of her family. And if what she saw was true, and she saw both her aunt and supposed her brother but not her baby brother among them…

Rhaenys sighed as she leaned on the balcony, her head hanging down. Please, tell me it’s not true.
Didn't expect Rhaenys to have dragon dreams too, huh? But given what she saw, she now has a strong clue as to what will come ahead. Given her already serious mistrust of Varys, it won't take her long to figure it out.

I always intended to have Jon and Yujin duke it out, but it was not going to end cleanly. Yujin substitutes Karl Tanner in that he doesn't play by the rules, and that move with the teapot could've gone badly. But also, we see the start of Khiara being really close to Jon and that she's not above attraction after all. But Jon still better be careful.

And yes! Arya gets to join the Jade Order while many are about to get better and happier (better watch out, Benjen)

And oh boy, the adversaries of the Starks and Targaryens are really taking it up a notch. While Shu will have the every one of them under watch and Varys about to proceed, both will work together to undermine the Targaryens. Everyone really is in danger now.
Hey! Hope you are all happy and healthy, as always.

This is probably the longest chapter I ever wrote. When it comes to writing stories, I do not skimp out on the details because they add important context to the plot (“the devil is in the details,” as we all heard before). Please bear with me.

Sam shifted nervously, adjusting his robes and running his hands through his hair for the twelfth time in a row. He was walking alongside Meiying as they waited in the courtyard of her family’s house. They were only ennobled recently, and they had a small estate in the outskirts of the capital, which took Sam and Meiying about an hour to travel by horse.

“Sam, calm down,” Meiying assured him. “It’s just afternoon tea with my family.”

“It’s just… this is the first time that I will meet your parents. Given what has happened between us for the past few moons, I have a strong feeling of why they asked me here.”

“Don’t worry so much. Once they see you speaking guanhua very well and then how you’ve done great work so far, they’ll like you. Don’t worry,” Meiying tried to calm him down.

“Let’s hope so, May,” Sam called her by her nickname, which they had decided last moon. She smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

“My lady,” they turned to see a servant open the screen doors to the house. “Your parents are ready.”

“Shall we?” May gestured to the doors. Sam took another breath before following her.

Yesterday marked the third moon of their courtship. May took him to her favorite teahouses and shops throughout Yin, showing more of the capital than Sam was exposed to. What really surprised Sam was that May was a painting enthusiast, as she took him to various presentations by the popular painters within the capital. She even did some painting also, which were quite good after she showed them to him and spent much of her spare time with other painters.

“You could make a living out of painting, May. I’m not saying this just because I like you,” Sam told her.

“I’m very happy that you said that, but I don’t think my family will like it if I did pursue painting full-time,” May replied with sadness.

“Why not?” Sam asked.

“Painters are not guaranteed to live comfortably, and my family are nobility, so to have their daughter be an artist is something that they don’t want to happen.”

“Anything else?” Sam had to know.
“As of now, I am their only child and they want to pass on their wealth to my future husband. So, for me to be a painter would be an embarrassment to them.”

In that moment, Sam felt closer to May than before. His father Randyll Tarly forbade him from becoming a maester despite his love for books and instead forced him to be a warrior. When that ultimately didn’t work, Randyll threatened him with that hunt.

“You don’t have to listen to your parents all the time, May,” Sam said.

“I must not disobey my parents, Sam. You might have found a way to disobey yours, but they’re all the way in Westeros while mine are close by. To dishonor your parents is unthinkable here, Sam.”

However, after seeing how well she painted, Sam didn’t want her to give it up. “Maybe… you could paint in the palace. I do have privileges after all, and your parents shouldn’t have any problems with you being there.”

“You would do that for me?” May asked hopefully.

“Of course. I like you and your gift shouldn’t be wasted.”

May grinned and she gave him a strong kiss on the cheek.

Going back to the present moment, Sam walked further into the Yoon house. It was as decorated as other places owned by lords and with screen doors opening into several other rooms. One thing that Yi-Ti gets right, they know how to be efficient with space. Even though the house looked small, it had more rooms than expected of its size.

Sam and May arrived at the main chambers, where her parents sat on one side of a low table. As was customary, Sam and May kowtowed before them. “Good afternoon, Lord and Lady Yoon,” he introduced himself. “It is an honor to finally meet you.”

Standing back up, Sam laid a wooden box of fresh pears in front of them. In Yi-Tish culture, the pear symbolized grace and nobility and bestowed wisdom and health, with many legends saying that the pear gives women fertility. Strangers always had to give pears to each other on first meeting so as to wish them good fortune.

May’s parents looked surprised that Sam even knew that custom at all. Gesturing them to sit down, Lord Yoon poured Sam and May cups of tea, which they held out with both hands. They didn’t drink until after Lord and Lady Yoon drank from theirs.

“Meiying has told us much about you,” Lord Yoon spoke in guanhua. “At least only the good parts.”

“I hope that is enough for you, my lord,” Sam replied back. Lord and Lady Yoon were more surprised at how well he spoke guanhua.

“How long have you been here, Lord Sam?” Lady Yoon asked.

“A few years now, my lady.”

“And yet, you speak guanhua better than most who have lived all their lives,” Lady Yoon showed how impressed she was.

“Thank you very much,” Sam replied, smiling from the praise.
“Our daughter told us what you do, but I would like to hear it from your mouth, Lord Sam,” Lord Yoon spoke. “You work in the household of Prince Kaijin?”

“Yes, my lord. I am the assistant to his steward,” Sam answered.

“And you have regular access to His Highness?”

Sam had some understanding of why he would ask that. “Yes, I do.”

“Hmmm,” Lord Yoon said aloud. “How does a white devil like yourself manage to enter the service of the imperial family?”

“Father,” May was shocked. “Why would you say that?”

“No, no. It’s all right,” Sam prepared himself for that. “Perhaps you know of Daeron Targaryen?”

Lord Yoon snorted. “You must be joking. Ever since “The Conquest of Dorne” was released in circulation, he’s all my friends have been talking about. They even purchased black robes with red lining and flags with the three-headed dragon since they want to honor the one who was named after the Young Dragon.”

Sam smiled in pride. The most recent book he had translated for the Grand Secretary was “The Conquest of Dorne,” written in the hand of the Young Dragon himself. Given that Jon was the only one in the empire who could control a dragon and shared his name, many nobles and commoners started to dress themselves in black and red so that they could feel as if they were a part of the Targaryen legacy. The book sellers throughout Yin were overwhelmed with requests for the Yi-Tish translation of “The Conquest of Dorne” after the ones who read it praised its elegant simplicity and richness of blood, battles, and bravery while allowing a glimpse into Dornish culture. Because of the book’s success, Sam was granted a small portion of the sales.

“I was the one that translated it, my lord,” Sam answered. “Prince Daeron is my friend.”

“Truly?” That was something that Lord and Lady Yoon didn’t expect.

“He was my friend when no one else would be, and he fought for me back in Westeros. That’s why I came all the way with him, even though I still had family.”

Lady Yoon set down her cup. “No wonder why that book has become so popular. You helped translate and you had a direct source of information. I have to admit that when I read it, I found myself… captivated. But then again, you can’t go wrong with war accounts.”

“No, you cannot,” Sam admitted.

Lord Yoon pursed his lips in thought before finding his next question. “Now that we have spoken on your achievements and position, tell us more about your family. Who are they?”

Sam talked about the history of House Tarly, how they were descended from Garth Greenhand, and how his father was a great warrior back in Westeros.

“But if your family was so powerful, why did you leave them?” Lady Yoon asked.

“Mother, that’s a… personal matter for Sam,” May was uncomfortable.

“From how he described them, he comes from a good family. Why did he have to leave?”

Sam sighed before he found the words. “My father is a great warrior, but he expects both of his
sons to follow his example. When I couldn’t meet his expectations, he forced me out.”

Lord Yoon crossed his arms. “So… you are the eldest, but not the favorite son.”

Sam laughed uncomfortably, while May was looking at her father with offense. “That’s one way to describe it.”

Lord Yoon nodded. “I see… But will you still inherit your family’s lands and castle?”

“Father!” May scolded her, causing him to return the look.

“No matter what my father has to say, since I am still alive, that’s the law,” Sam was slowly disliking Lord Yoon.

Lord Yoon poured himself more tea. “You must understand why I ask this, Lord Sam. A stable income and secure station are paramount to a successful and happy marriage.”

Sam coughed while drinking his tea. Marriage? “My lord, I think you have the wrong idea. I never made any proposals to your daughter.”

“But why else did you woo her for three moons? It is certainly not companionship, or she wouldn’t have talked about you so much,” Lord Yoon stated.

Sam cleared his throat. “My lord, it is true. I like your daughter and I don’t wish for our time to end prematurely. But I understand that marriage is a serious subject and I haven’t broached it with her because I didn’t want to cause misunderstandings.”

“And why haven’t you mentioned it? You two are of the age to marry and my daughter already turned down many other offers for her hand,” Lord Yoon revealed.

Sam wasn’t sure how to answer, but then, he had his own questions to ask. “Why do you bring up the topic of marriage, my lord?”

“First off, you’re a white devil, which means that you already have obstacles to negotiate, more so than one who was born here. You might be in Prince Kaijin’s household, but His Highness was born from a tea server and therefore is far down the line of succession for the phoenix throne. You haven’t taken the examinations, so you will be out of a job should something bad happen to His Highness. Lastly, you might come from a lord’s seed, but you are far away from home and the chances of you inheriting your family’s properties are slim given how you described your relationship with your father,” Lord Yoon listed. “With all that taken into consideration, your position is very unstable, and you might not enjoy the favor of the emperor forever. How can a strong marriage be built on a shaky foundation?”

May blinked and her lips trembled from critical her father was of Sam.

But he was unmoved. “Those words that you have just said, won’t they apply to you also?”

“What do you mean?” Lord Yoon narrowed his eyes.

“You only became a lord a few years ago and your father came from merchants, the bottom of society. And I heard that you only got your lordship because you paid for it. But you should know that lordships are hard to hold on to, especially for newly ennobled,” Sam was blunt.

“What are you trying to say to me?” Lord Yoon cocked his head at him.
“You might think that being a lord gives you protection, but the moment you are found to be useless or a liability to those that put you in that place, you’ll find that being a lord doesn’t really mean much. I should know because I’ve seen just how unstable nobility is,” Sam continued.

Lord Yoon was very displeased. “You think you can judge me and tell me what my position is?”

“That’s exactly what you did, my lord. And I would have thought that given how recently you became a lord, you would have become wiser about where you are. But apparently, being a lord only made you more complacent and inflated your ego,” Sam added.

Lady Yoon gasped while Lord Yoon became livid. “Is this how you speak to your elders, boy?”

“You talk down to me, I will do the same thing to you,” Sam answered.

Lord Yoon scoffed. “Then you don’t understand. I am the elder and I can talk to you however I want. But you should keep your mouth shut and be silent when I say words. It seems my daughter chose poorly on her future partner, for you have no manners.”

Sam was in no mood to stay in Lord Yoon’s presence. Standing up without getting his cue, he bowed slightly to May’s father. “I am sorry to have wasted your time today, my lord. And I just realized that I have other duties to attend to. If you’ll excuse me.”

He saw himself out of the house, but before he exited through the gates, May caught up with him. “I’m so sorry, Sam. I didn’t know he was going to do that. All I said that I was impressed by you and that you were well-read and that I enjoyed every second that I am by your side.”

“I don’t blame you, May,” Sam told her. “But if your father is going to talk to me like that, elder or not, I have nothing more to say to him.”

Going for the gates, May grabbed onto his arm. “I will see you later, right? Please, I’m sorry.”

Sam turned back to her. She’s not him, he reminded herself. And he did need some time to cool down, but he didn’t want this relationship to end so badly. “Yes, of course. How about I see you tomorrow? The teahouse where we first met?”

May smiled widely. “I’d love that.”

Sam pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “See you tomorrow, then.”

Khiara moved through the Samchun Quarter of Yin, which was the area of the capital that had the largest concentration of merchants and commoners and was also next to the port. She was scheduled to inspect the fleet assigned to the Central District on behalf of her father, with Admiral Okamoto at her side when the review commenced.

However, what really weighed in on her mind that day was Arya Stark at her side. Today marked her first assignment with the Jade Order, where she was to serve as her personal escort during the fleet review. She, along with the other women who were inducted with her before Yujin rudely interrupted and her usual entourage of guards and servants, would accompany her to the fleet review.

From the streets to a member of the Jade Order, Arya Stark was like her adopted brother in that they both started out as castaways and rose up through sheer effort and connections, although they would not admit the latter. Hopefully, they both know that without people to help them, they’ll never get anywhere.
More importantly, Khiara had inquired about Arya’s personal details from Gong-Er besides the “Underfoot” detail. She had watched her father be relieved of his head and had spent much of the recent years on the run from the agents of the Baratheons and Lannisters, both of whom had some very colorful histories but paled when compared to even the azure line. How typical… everyone thinking that they’re the center of the world when we are all but insignificant.

As they neared the port, where activity increased as they walked closer, Khiara turned to Arya, who walked beside her. She was dressed in the customary white robes over jade green shirt, with her swords hidden from view. What continued to amaze Khiara was that despite the existence of the Jade Order and clear records of their accolades, people still made the mistake of thinking the women of the Jade Order were weak and therefore easy opponents. And every time, they were not only proven wrong, their heads were put on display once they were killed. Arya provided a perfect example of how the Jade Order was deadly, as she didn’t look particularly threatening from her size alone, but she carried a hardened outlook on life and was very capable of killing those who either tried to kill her or had ever wronged her.

“Lady Arya,” Khiara spoke to her in the common tongue. Good thing the rest of the commoners don’t speak the common tongue, or they might report back to the Prime Minister if I spoke guanhua.

“Yes, Your Highness,” she responded.

“How is your first day as a member of the Jade Order?”

“I’m very honored to be part of this group, Your Highness,” Arya answered.

“Please speak plainly, Lady Arya. You are amongst other women who are like you and you wouldn’t have come here if you spoke properly all the time,” Khiara urged her.

Arya nodded. “I never felt more comfortable around many people before, Your Highness. At Winterfell and at King’s Landing, I was always told to be around other ladies like myself, but I never did take to dancing and music before I came here. And to see other women like me who also tell me that music and dance do not make me weak… the best feeling that I had in a long time.”

She doesn’t like to be weak. “That’s good to hear, Lady Arya. Gong-Er also tells me that you are very good at being sneaky, since you were able to hide in the most unlikely places like under the stairs during training and you did hide from those who tried to kill you before,” Khiara said.

“The first time that I learned to hide, I had to, or my life would have ended quickly. So, it was more desperation rather than coming naturally to me,” Arya admitted.

“Still, shows that with the right amount of training, you can also protect me from very unlikely threats. Gong-Er recommended that you be sent to a specialist, where you will learn secret arts. Assassins come in many forms and the best way to defeat them is to understand and learn their ways,” Khiara offered.

Arya beamed. “Thank you, Your Highness. I guess it doesn’t hurt to have more than one skill.”

“Indeed, as your dance performance showed,” Khiara agreed, causing Arya to blush from embarrassment. She might be good at dancing, but she still is not comfortable in her mind. “Tell me truthfully. Who was your first kill?” Arya looked at her, unsure how to answer. “I’m not talking about accidental killings or telling other people to hurt for you. I want to know the first time you deliberately wanted someone dead and followed through with your own hands.”
Arya swallowed. “Why do you wish to know that, Your Highness?”

“As you’re in the Jade Order, you will have to kill to protect me. I just want to know if you can take a life without regrets, as thinking too much on that will undermine you greatly,” Khiara explained to her.

Arya blinked rapidly. As Khiara’s request was very clear, she could not avoid it. “I… It was back in the riverlands, when I was being taken to the Twins with the Hound. I was hopeful to return to my brother and even my mother because it had been so long since I’ve seen them. But while there, I saw Freys and Boltons massacre my brother’s soldiers and the only reason why I was able to escape was because the Hound knocked me out.”


“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Go on,” she urged her.

“Me and the Hound were passing by a few Frey bannermen and I heard one of them talking about how Robb died, going into detail how they mounted his direwolf’s head on his body. After hearing that, I couldn’t control myself and I walked to them, pretending to be a little lost girl who wanted food. They told me to ‘fuck off,’ but they were starting to change their minds when I showed them a coin. After dropping it, I stabbed that man in the neck over and over, wanting to kill him for talking too much,” Arya added.

“Did you kill the other Frey men?” Khiara inquired.

“No, the Hound killed the rest. As for me, I picked up my coin, which was given to me by a Braavosi, and whispered ‘Valar morghulis,’” Arya finished.

“All men must die,” Khiara had heard that too. “Valar dohaeris.”

“Very good, Your Highness,” Arya was impressed. “You seem to know much about the world outside of your palace.”

“More than you can imagine, Lady Arya,” Khiara decided to test her by speaking High Valyrian. When she rose an eyebrow, she switched back to the common tongue. “Right, you don’t speak High Valyrian.”

“How do you know how to speak that?” Arya queried.

“For those that came west of the Jade Gates or the Bone Mountains, the common tongue or High Valyrian were the only ways to communicate with them,” Khiara explained. “As I sometimes have to deal with newcomers, those are two foreign tongues that I had to learn.”

Arya had to be reminded that the surface of a person could not easily accepted, as that would prevent her from seeing their depths. “Makes me wonder how little of the world I’ve seen.”

“You’re young, Lady Arya, so you have more time than I do, if only a little,” Khiara replied. “Which makes me wonder. Has Prince Daeron ever journey outside of Winterfell or the North before he came here?”

“No, but I’m sure that he’ll be able to go anywhere now that he is trying to mount Meleys,” Arya told her.
“Mounting? You mean trying to fly her?” That was certainly news for Khiara. “Is he well enough to do that?”

“He’s a dragon besides being a wolf, Your Highness. He has to do it eventually. Besides, I always wanted to see someone fly through the air on a dragon,” Arya spoke dreamily.

“How does he plan on accomplishing that?”

“One step at a time,” Arya answered. “No one has done that in over a century, so he can’t rush it.”

“Understandable,” Khiara acquiesced. “I have to admit also, that’ll be a sight to see. On another note, I trust Daeron is retraining himself? The last encounter with my bad-tempered brother could have ended badly.”

Arya’s face twisted in anger at the mention of him. “Let’s just say that he’s relearning everything he was ever taught about fighting and Hoon Ti will help him get there. He’s not going to fall for the same trap twice.”

“Good,” Khiara nodded in approval. “Will be a shame if I have to take care of him again.”

Arya gave an uncomfortable smile at her jest. In all honesty, Khiara found herself liking the feel of his back muscles, his face, and his hair. *Now I’m beginning to understand why Valyrians were so known for their beauty, even though Daeron is half-Valyrian.* And she also got a closer look at his developed chest and she was tempted to bed him right then and there, but she knew that would push him away and she wanted to get him close to her. That was why she opted to kiss his forehead instead. *It won’t be long before he will succumb to my advances,* she thought with triumph.

After arriving at the port and greeting Admiral Okamoto, he signaled for the fleet review to commence. All she had to do was sit down and watch as all of the ships passed by her observation point, and Arya and the others had to stand guard for all that time.

“What have you heard from the Ministry of Justice?” Khiara knew that Admiral Okamoto had people who owed him favors in that particular ministry.

“The vice minister was able to obtain the new list of potential subversives to be put under watch. You’re not going to believe who was included,” Admiral Okamoto whispered before saying the names.

“So… the Prime Minister is trying to damage Daeron and his family,” Khiara thought aloud.

“That’s not all, Your Highness. I got word that the southwest and southeast captain-generals were having provosts follow myself, Lord Buko, and Lord Joon among others. They’re trying to come after us now,” Okamoto added.

Khiara laughed in amusement. “Looks like they have just declared war on us, on me. Only way to respond is to retaliate.” She looked at Admiral Okamoto. “We can trust the admirals and the captains to side with us when the time comes?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“So that leaves the northern armies then. I can take care of the Northeast Province and the Five Forts. Have Minister Zong put more pressure on Lord Joon. If he sides with us, the northern provinces will be in our grasp,” she commanded.

“Yes, Your Highness.”
“And leak what you’ve learned to Lord Buko. Chances are that he’ll be threatened and whatever he’s planning with the other insurgents in the army will have to be accelerated. I don’t like the idea of working with potential mutineers, but for now, our interests and theirs have aligned. We both seek to destroy the Prime Minister and his faction,” Khiara assessed.

“I agree with you, Your Highness. But when the time comes, we’ll have to deal with the mutineers.”

“That we will, Admiral. That we will.”

After the fleet review was complete, Khiara went back to her palace and decided to eat dinner alone. If I invited Daeron, he might be pushed way also. I give him more space to think, to reflect, and he’ll see eventually.

But not entirely alone. She kept her personal guard with her, including Arya. But instead of eating with her, she had them play a song. Although Arya was not a singer, she played a pipe and was part of the accompanying band. Khiara observed how tight knit those women were, as they laughed and bantered with one another over things like who had the most dust on their clothes and who sweated the most during practice. They then tuned their instruments, making sure that they were in the right pitch, before playing the song. The singer of the group sang:

Zui dou zui le he bi fei yao xing zhe
Shang dou shang le fan zheng bu hui yu he
Shuo dou shuo le mei you li qi ke ze
Kuai le bei ai kun zhe ye shi zhong xuan ze

Ya dou ya le zai ku ye shi wu sheng
Xia dou xia le sui yan qian yin chen
Tong dou tong le kan lai ye xi guan teng
Shi shui chang guo de tong bing kuai le zhe

Zi nüe zhe xiang shou ai de het se jing ran ye gan dao kua li le
Qing yuan bei du she chan zhe ju jue chuang wai bai ge
Jiao huan de zi ji xiao de mei xiang guo yi yi bu she

Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān

Pian dou pian le hai shou lian de pei he
Wan dou wan le he bu xiang shou ye se
Leng dou leng le shui dui shui bu bian leng
Qing tian jiu suan bu duo hai bu shi de guo

Ài dou ai le shui fei yao bu ke
Cuo dou cuo le cheng ren you ru he
Si dou si le tian liang le zai shuo
You shen me zi ge shuo shi shui de cuo

Zi nüe zhe xiang shou ai de hei se jing ran ye gan dao kuai le
Qing yuan bei du she chan zhe ju jue chuang wai bai ge
Jiao huan de zi ji xiao de mei xiang guo yi yi bu she

Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān

Xīn shāng zhe ai de hei se xi guan le mou xie zhe mo
Qing yuan bei du she chan zhe ju jue chuang wai bai ge
Dai zhe xie xing de xin de gan yuan bei fu de shen ke

Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān
Ài wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān wǎn’ān

Khiara nodded to the group, showing her approval of their choice of song. *Always was interested in how we unintentionally cause pain to ourselves and yet still feel the rush from it.* She lost count of how many times she made decisions that ran against her conscious, decisions that her girl self would’ve never made. However, the path to power and safety was narrow and treacherous and only a few would survive.

Also, there was something… liberating about causing pain to the self because it showed that person how fragile they really were and thus, there was no point in being afraid. *If I am vulnerable, so is the other person. And that means that I can fight against anyone, including sorts like the Prime Minister. As they wisely say further west, we all die. And knowing that we will go back into dust makes me more certain of how I should live.*

And that was her secret of not being afraid of all obstacles, as any put up by man would eventually fall. Officials, generals, princes, and rulers all came and went, and her rivals in the Prime Minister and Prince Yujin of all people were no exceptions.

As she finally dismissed Arya for the night, she began to ponder if her thoughts also applied to dragons, the actual ones. And for a moment… she could find no answer as to whether she could overcome them. *If they’re not obstacles, I best make them work to my advantage, and I know who to do it with and how to.*

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Daenerys paced around her chambers, confused at what she had seen last night. Seeing herself flying atop of Drogon in a dream and killing that wyrm or wyvern was something that she had seen before. Adding to her joy was seeing Daeron ride atop of Meleys and joining her in killing the false dragon, which could only mean that they were meant to fly together in the air and rule as true dragons. *Maybe that’s the same conclusion he reached.*

But nearby the corpse of the false dragon, she noticed a woman staring at it and both Drogon and
Meleys flying down to her. As she got closer, Daenerys noticed that she had all of the traits of a Dornishwoman, with tan skin and black hair. Her beauty became more obvious after both of the dragons landed in front of her.

To her surprise, the Dornishwoman was able to touch both Meleys and Drogon and calm them down. As the dream ended, Daenerys had just managed to notice that she had purple eyes and heard her, “I am the blood of the dragon.”

The Dornishwoman’s last words were what got to Daenerys, as those were the same words that Daeron said when they first met, and it was until the second time that she got his name and how they were of the same blood. However, she didn’t know any Dornishwoman who even shared Targaryen blood besides the Martells born from one of her namesakes, the one who was married to Prince Martell in order to fully incorporate Dorne into the Seven Kingdoms, and their share of dragon blood was too diluted. Or do I?

In House Targaryen’s most recent memory, the only Dornishwoman connected to them was Elia Martell and she bore her brother two children, both of whom were brutally murdered. Digging through her mind, she did remember Viserys talking about Rhaenys resembling “more of a Dornish shit” than a true dragon.

Daenerys’ eyes widened at that. Could that be… Rhaenys? It certainly fit the description and there was no other way that she could have approached the dragons unless she had Rhaegar’s blood, dragon blood. And if her attractiveness said anything, she truly inherited Elia’s supposed good looks.

But it can’t be. How did Rhaenys survive? And who died then? That was the one thing that Daenerys couldn’t comprehend. It would have been hard to disguise a small girl with another that would have looked like her and even so, Rhaenys would not have survived unless she had a protector. And even that presented problems, as whoever wanted to keep her alive would not have done so because they were loyal to House Targaryen. The stag usurpers were on the rise, so anyone who wanted to curry favor would have turned her over if they really wanted to.

Daenerys wanted to believe in the best outcome, and that included that a part of her family besides Daeron was indeed alive. But as life taught her, the good things in the world were few and far in between. Most importantly, if Rhaenys was indeed alive, she didn’t expect a warm reunion. If she saw me, I can imagine her first question being, “Why didn’t you try to find me? Why did you leave me?” And I might have been born after her, but I am still her aunt and who would blame her in asking that? I would, Daenerys thought with sadness. And she’s a Targaryen, which means that the past twenty years would not have been kind to her, and she would only be filled with anger and bitterness towards everyone, like myself.

But she was going to ponder that another time, until the next dream. Maybe I’ll have more answers then.

She heard shouting echo through the halls of the Great Pyramid, prompting her to run towards the source. She then saw a group of Unsullied bring Ser Barristan into the throne room, while all of them were cut and bloodied. Fearing the worst of the old man she grew to like, she ran towards Ser Barristan and was relieved to find him still breathing, but he was severely wounded.

“What happened?” she turned to Grey Worm.

“We were ambushed,” Grey Worm answered in High Valyrian. “Harpies. I was about to be killed before Barristan came in and saved my life. But he’s hurt bad.”
“Let’s take him to my chambers. We have to make sure that he doesn’t die,” Daenerys ordered as she followed Barristan and the Unsullied group.

A few hours later, she sat on the side of her bed while Barristan was resting, wrapped in cloth to cover his wounds. Daenerys that Barristan, the one who spoke so well of her brother, was a tough old man, but age did have its drawbacks and he might grow weaker even if he did recover. However, she didn’t want the former Kingsguard to die, as he was the only one left who really understood Rhaegar and there was so much more that she wanted to know of her brother.

She heard footsteps approaching the bed, seeing both Tyrion and Daario enter her chambers.

“Will he be all right, Your Grace?” Tyrion asked after Ser Barristan.

“He just needs rest,” Daenerys answered. “They sewed up all of the wounds that he received, but he’ll have to wait before wielding a sword again.”

“Given how deadly the old man is, he might go crazy from all of the action he’ll miss out,” Daario chuckled. But Daenerys was not amused, and she made that clear with the glare she sent his way.

“How is Grey Worm?”

“He’ll be all right, Your Grace. Missandei is at his bedside,” Tyrion answered.

“Of course,” she mused. “But onto more pressing matters. What have you learned?”

“I had the men look around, and they were indeed harpies,” Daario started with. “I can only surmise that you considering reopening the fighting pits made them bolder, as they might have interpreted it as you cracking under pressure.”

“I’m not interested in your conjectures, Daario. I want to know how they were able to almost kill Grey Worm and Ser Barristan,” Daenerys wanted to retaliate against those were involved.

“I tracked down the prostitute that led Grey Worm and the Unsullied with him down that trap,” Daario revealed. “It appears that she got into the brothel for the sole purpose of getting close to us and that she was in close league with whoever connected her to the Harpy himself.”

“Did you bring her here?” Daenerys finally found where to direct her rage.

“Yes, she’s secure,” Daario affirmed.

Daenerys laid her hands upon Barristan’s sleeping form, silently hoping that he would recover soon. *I need you, Ser Barristan.* “Show her to me, in the catacombs.”

In the darkness of the catacombs, where Viserion and Rhaegal rested, Daenerys stood while the Unsullied and the Second Sons brought in the prostitute name Vala. Drogon was flying around somewhere and Daenerys was about to let her other two dragons out of the catacombs so that they could grow more properly. But for now, their presence was needed.

After Daario forced Vala on her knees, Daenerys could only see how much hate she had for her. *But why?* She didn’t look like someone who would prosper under the rule of the slave masters, so there had to be another reason why she would do what Daario said.

“We finally meet, after I heard so much about you,” Daenerys have a hard gaze.

“I should be honored, then. I must’ve caused much a lot of hurt if you had to see me for yourself;”
Vala spat, causing Daario to slap her on her head.

“Daario, please,” Daenerys stopped him. “This is the second time that you hurt people under my care. I’m not going to go over the how in what you did. There is no denying that you are in league with the Sons of the Harpy. But I’m not understanding why you would help them. It doesn’t look like you lived an easy life while the slave masters were around.”

“And you think you’re better?” Vala scoffed. “How typical.”

“Why do you think so?”

“You think that giving these slaves freedom, who didn’t even know what that looked like, will make this world a better place? No,” Vala shook her head. “There’s more violence these days and I don’t know if I will make it past the next day because of what you did.”

“There was no guarantee that you would continue to survive while the slave masters were in power either,” Daenerys pointed out. “Yes, what I did was something that no one had ever seen before and yes, there is still instability. But no one should have to live in chains. Whatever benefits the slaves will later benefit you.”

“Not the way I see it,” Vala denied her reasoning. “All I see is a queen who wants power and found a way to gain a lot of it by breaking those who were in power before her. By freeing slaves, you break the power of the slave masters and you are now in control. Rather I have many in power than just one, which is you.”

Daenerys shook her head at that logic. “If you think that the slave masters used their power wisely, then you are more of a fool than I thought you were.”

“I’m not done,” Vala added. “These new freedmen… there is an order to things, and you disrupted it. And I cannot tell the difference between those who were free before and those who were free now.”

“Is that why you did this? Because you didn’t like it that you couldn’t tell who were slaves, and who were not?” Daenerys asked pointedly.

“My life was hard before, I admit that. But you made it more difficult for me. I can’t even feed my child that well because there is just too much of those who want food,” Vala included.

“Oh, we know about your child. It must’ve been hard for you two,” Daenerys stared down at her.

Vala’s eyes widened. “What have you done to him?”

“Nothing,” Daario told her. “But on my command, he will be harmed.”

“That won’t be necessary, Daario,” Daenerys shook her head. “I hope you realize the situation you are in. You’re going to die because the consequences must follow. But whether or not you want your son provided for will be dependent on what you have to say to me. I need to know who the Harpy is, and who’s supporting him. If you tell me that, your son will be safe and I’ll make sure that he’ll live a good life. It’s your choice.”

Vala gulped and blinked rapidly. Sighing in resignation, she nodded. “Okay. I can’t tell you who the Harpy is because I never actually met him in person. But I do know who is supporting him. I just hope that you’re prepared for what I have to say.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Daenerys relaxed.
Vala told her that the slave masters of Yunkai, Astapor, and Volantis were funding the Sons of the Harpy, and that the Volantene tigers were ready to send troops and a fleet to Slaver’s Bay since Daenerys’ actions would threaten them eventually. She, along with Daario and Tyrion, were shocked, as the conspiracy was much larger than they had anticipated.

“But that’s not all. There are rumors that the Harpies will support the one called “Young Griff,” who has the Golden Company at his back. They plan to replace you and appoint your supposed nephew in your place, provided that he return things back to normal,” Vala finished.

Daenerys groaned, while hiding her distress at the situation turning. So, this is what they’re planning. I have to face my supposed nephew sooner than I thought. She wasn’t sure on fighting “Young Griff,” nephew or not, but this wasn’t something that she could ignore. She knew that she had prepare accordingly.

But first, she had to punish Vala as promised. “Vala, I, Daenerys of House Targaryen, First of My Name, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons, sentence you to die.” She turned to Rhaegal and Viserion. “Dracarys.”

Vala closed her eyes as both of them unleashed their flames onto her. There was no screaming on her part, just silence as she was turned into ash.

Rubbing both of their snouts, she turned to Daario and Tyrion.

“Get as many men who could fight. We need to be ready when our enemies come on our doorstep,” Daenerys commanded them.

“As you wish,” Daario affirmed before running off to issue her orders.

“What do you plan on doing with the new threats? With the forces we have now, we might not be able to hold against the Harpies, the slave masters, the Volantenes, Young Griff, and the Golden Company all at once,” Tyrion stated.

“We have to buy time,” Daenerys answered. “I’ll have to tell Daeron that he needs to hurry.”

“It might be a while before he can come here. Even so, whatever he brings might not be enough,” Tyrion added.

Daenerys sighed. As she walked through the Great Pyramid and thought about how she could buy time, she tried to reach out to him. Please, Daeron. We need you here. I need you.

Robb accidentally bumped into a Volantene, who cursed at him in High Valyrian, a tongue he couldn’t understand. But he scurried away as soon as he saw Grey Wind growl at him. “It’s okay, boy,” he rubbed his neck.

After first arriving at Tyrosh, he looked around for any word on the Company of the Rose from the Tyroshi and the captain of the ship. However, no one had seen the sellsword company made up of northmen descendants on the island or in nearby Myr. But after drinking some ale, he happened upon a couple of sellswords who were discussing their business in the common tongue and they mentioned something about the Company of the Rose on contract in Volantis. Approaching them, Robb asked, “Good sers, might I trouble you with some word on the Company of the Rose?” As they were sellswords, he slipped them two gold dragons and paid for their drinks.

Obliged, the sellswords told him that the Company of the Rose was currently commanded by a northern exile, a man by the name of Cayn Moss, their Captain-General. House Moss, a minor
house, he thought. Although not as large as the Golden Company, the Company of the Rose comprised of five thousand men and they didn’t break a contract, were well-equipped, and experienced in heavy combat.

Before Robb left to find another ship to Volantis, one of the sellswords told him, “If I were you, I would also look for the Wolf Pack. They might be crazy fuckers, but they number three thousand men and are the types you want on your side. Since you’re a northmen, they might be more amenable to you than others.”

Robb only heard a few words about the Wolf Pack. Founded by Hallis Hornwood and Timotty Snow in the aftermath of the Dance of the Dragons and the collapse of the Triarchy, it was the only other free company operating in Essos that consisted chiefly of northmen and their descendants. “I’ll take that into consideration. Thank you, good ser.”

And here he was, in the most notable of the Free Cities and looking upon the famed Black Walls, where only those of the Old Blood were allowed in. Where Talisa’s family originated from.

Robb had no time to mourn her while he was on the run, but after Lord Royce granted him shelter at his hunting lodge, he spent most of his days crying and cursing himself for all of the deaths that happened because of him. Countless northmen, Lord Karstark’s sons and then him, and now the ones that were corpses at the Twins. He had to watch Talisa die, Wendel Manderly sacrifice himself so that he could escape, and he dreaded thinking about his mother. If she managed to stay alive for only a moment, the Freys and the Boltons would have killed her to silence her and anyone else that might have contradicted their claim of killing me.

Yohn Royce told him that his uncle Edmure Tully was a prisoner after his bedding of Roslin Frey, the Freys were made Lord Paramounts of the Riverlands and granted all of the Tully lands, and the Boltons were raised as Lord Paramount and Warden of the North while receiving all of the Stark lands. It hurt his heart to know that his home was occupied by the enemy, but as Lord Royce pointed out, there was nothing he could do. And if he reemerged, he would only end up dead. Wendel would have died for nothing if that happened.

Grief for his wife and mother turned to rage, and he was tempted to go all the way to King’s Landing and fight his way to the Red Keep, but he quickly put that thought away once he realized how ridiculous that sounded. Then rage turned to hopelessness. I was a king and I led armies into battle, to victory, but that wasn’t enough as it shows. His father never taught him how to deal with futility, as he seriously doubted that his and his father’s situation were the same.

Finally, Robb accepted his new circumstances thanks to Yohn Royce’s words and his father’s friend gave him a reason to continue. It would be dishonorable if he wasted Lord Royce’s gold if he didn’t use it for its intended purpose and Robb remembered his words on how hardship could define who he could be as a man. And he did promise to come back with men. I’m not going to leave this city until I find and recruit the Company of the Rose, no matter how painful that will be to me.

Walking along the Long Bridge, where he was struck by how well-made it was over a river as powerful as the Rhoyne and how much shops lined it, Robb struggled to brush off those who tried to sell things to him, things that he didn’t need. Them speaking certainly mostly High Valyrian certainly didn’t help matters, as he couldn’t understand one word of what they were saying. As he walked towards the center, he saw many pairs of hands and many heads displayed on pikes. Must be some local trouble. Not going to trouble myself with it.

Many eyed Grey Wind with some alarm, as they had never seen a direwolf before. And Robb tied Ice to his back, keeping a strong grip on the straps. Then, he glanced around and noticed two men
looking and following him. *They’ve been following me since the docks,* he thought with alarm.

But Robb had the good sense to not run, as they were locals and they would find him again. Looking up, he looked at the famed Temple of the Lord of Light and figured that they wouldn’t try to harm him near a holy sight. *If they are as pious as those who follow the Seven, I should be fine.*

As he finally stepped off the Long Bridge and neared the temple, Robb recalled all that he knew of the Temple of the Lord of Light. The date of its construction was not known, but the temple was an enormity of pillars, steps, buttresses, bridges, domes, and towers flowing into one another as if they had all been chiseled from one colossal rock. It was indeed many times larger than the Great Sept of Baelor, although Robb had never seen that before. He also saw a hundred hues of red, yellow, gold, and orange meet and meld in the temple walls, dissolving one into the other like clouds at sunset. *Even with this splendor, it still doesn’t beat the heart tree at Winterfell.* For a brief second, he missed home.

Upon finding a fountain and passing by many red priestesses who preached in front of the Temple, he untied Ice and unsheathed it while Grey Wind drank from the fountain. Scratching his direwolf’s head, Robb turned around and readied himself, but he was surprised to see ten men encircling him. They were all dressed in armor and had tattoos of every kind on their face. From what Talisa told him, freeborn Volantenes tattoo themselves to show off their prowess in battle and their individual exploits, but Robb couldn’t really understand what each of them meant.

“You from Westeros, stranger?” one of them asked in the common tongue while stepping forward. By now, a small crowd was forming around them. Robb nodded. “You from its northern kingdom?” He nodded again. “What’s your creature’s name?”

“Grey Wind,” he answered.

“So… you are Robb Stark, formerly King in the North?”

Robb gulped. He couldn’t deny it, as that man clearly knew what to ask and already had a strong idea of what Grey Wind was. The direwolf rumbled, sensing the threat.

“How did you know?” Robb kept his grip on Ice.

“We had some idea on who you were the moment your ship docked. I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us,” the man told him.

“I’m very sorry, but I have important business to attend to. Can you tell whoever sent you that I am… unavailable?” Robb tried to talk his way out, even though that was his first time doing so in front of strangers.

“I wish I could. But no one turns down the invitation of Triarch Maegyr.”

“Maegyr?” Robb was stunned. “You mean… Malaquo Maegyr?”

“Exactly. Please follow us. He told us not to harm you and to bring you to him. But if you remain uncooperative…”

Robb was very nervous. He didn’t expect to be approached by Talisa’s powerful uncle, who was the patriarch of one of the most influential families in Volantis. *Whatever he wants with me, it can’t be good.* “My direwolf comes with me.”

The man bobbed his head, accepting his condition, before escorting him away from the Temple and towards the Black Walls.
Robb was struck by the profound differences between Volantis within the Black Walls and the city outside of it. Talisa told him that the Black Walls protected a literal labyrinth of palaces, courtyards, towers, temples, cloisters, bridges, and cellars. She also said that the Black Walls were a great oval of fused black dragonstone, harder than steel or diamond, built two hundred feet high by the Valyrian Freehold while it reigned supreme. It protected the oldest part of the city on the eastern shore, often called Old Volantis, and they were wide enough for six four-horse chariots to race around its top abreast, which happened every year to celebrate the founding of the city.

Many inside the Black Walls keep the old gods of Valyria. Courtesy of Talisa, Robb recognized shrines to the gods that his deceased wife described, which included: Arrax, the ruler of the gods, law, order, justice, governance and strength, Balerion, the god of death and of the underworld, Meleys, the goddess of love and fertility, Meraxes, goddess of the sky, Caraxes, god of the sea and twin of Meraxes, Vhagar, god of war, and Tessarion, goddess of music, arts, knowledge, healing, plague, prophecy, poetry, beauty, and archery. Talisa told him that those of the Old Blood weren’t exactly devout to the gods of Valyria, but they only worshipped because it further tied them to old Valyria, while those outside of the Black Walls worshipped R’hllor. Just like the Faith in a way, Robb thought.

After passing by many palaces that looked similar to each other, the group turned towards a very large manse, which dwarfed Winterfell by several proportions. Passing by the many hallways and chambers, they came to the largest one, where an old man was flanked by six female slaves lying on his side on a couch.

Talis had told Robb about her uncle only once. Besides being an old man, Malaquo Maegyr had no teeth left, but he was still just as potent and eager for conflict as in his prime. Although he was bitter enemies to the more peaceful elephants, the sellswords at Tyrosh had whispered that the actions of Daenerys Targaryen in liberating the slaves had sent shockwaves throughout the Free Cities and anyone who owned slaves suffered losses. And he even tried to hire the Golden Company to suppress the followers of R’hllor, since they were preaching for Daenerys, only to find that they were already under contract somewhere else. So, this is the man that made Talisa leave her home because they didn’t agree on slavery.

The old man gestured for Robb to sit down while sipping his goblet. “Welcome… King in the North.”

“I am afraid I don’t have that title anymore,” Robb made clear that he had accepted his new place.

“Do you know who I am?”

“You are Malaquo Maegyr, one of the three triarchs of Volantis and the leader of the tiger party,” Robb answered.

“Very good,” Malaquo was impressed. “How did you know that?”

“I was married to your niece, Talisa,” Robb hesitated.

“Right. The ill-fated union,” Malaquo sighed in sadness. “I don’t blame you for marrying her. She was a beautiful woman. The ones who are at fault are the ones who butchered her so mercilessly. You have no idea how long my brother and goodsister mourned her.”

“I am sorry that I couldn’t protect her,” Robb apologized.

“You are right to place the blame on yourself, since a man should protect his family and you haven’t done,” Malaquo spoke cruelly. “Although… that same charge could be made against me
also, since I didn’t try hard to make her stay. But what’s done is done.”

*Now I see why Talisa never really talked about you. You don’t really miss her,* Robb thought angrily.

“Enough about memories. What brings you here to our great city?” Malaquo inquired.

“I have business to attend to, which your men rudely interrupted,” Robb said.

“What kind of business does the King in the North, I’m sorry, former, have in Volantis?”

Robb exhaled. “I am looking for sellswords to hire.”

“Which company do you refer to?” Malaquo sat up fully.

“The Company of the Rose, for starters.”

“Ah, the northerner descendants,” Malaquo recognized. “Well, I will be happy to tell you that they are currently here in this city.”

“That’s why I’m here in the first place.”

“But… they are currently under contract for someone of the Old Blood and you should have a basic understanding that contracts for sellsword companies cannot be broken unless one of the parties defaulted on payment or service,” Malaquo revealed.

Robb nodded. “That much I understood.”

“Unless of course you have the coin necessary to buy out their contract and hire them into your service.”

“I have enough coin to accomplish that,” Robb told him.

“That maybe the case, but you are a Stark and a descendant of Torrhen Stark, the very king that made them go into exile in the first place. You really think that they’re going to work for you?”

“How I persuade is none of your concern.”

“I’m afraid it is,” Malaquo leaned forward. “You come into my city as a fugitive from Westeros. And you were married to my niece, who I am obliged to exact my family’s vengeance onto anyone that hurt her, which would include you.”

“I thought that you said that you didn’t blame me,” Robb became uneasy.

“You did marry her, which got her killed. And the fact that you’re here looking for sellswords to hire means you are trying to fight again. The question I have to ask is who you are fighting? Volantis is making its own preparations for war and we don’t need those who could potentially fight against us,” Malaquo explained to him.

Robb sighed. “With the sellswords that I have, I plan to go back to Westeros. I have family who need me, and I cannot allow them to wallow in despair. And you are right in that I do have responsibility in Talisa’s death, but I don’t intend on letting those who had a more direct hand in her demise remain free from punishment. They killed my father, my wife, and my unborn child, so I have more reason to avenge her death than you do.”

Malaquo narrowed his eyes at the Young Wolf, trying to see the sincerity in his words. But also
hearing that Starks were bad at lying, he leaned back, satisfied.

“Very well. I will give you the name of the person who hired the Company of the Rose. If you hire
them, then I would like for you to leave Volantis. Go back to your home and try to retake it, if you
can.”

Robb nodded, but he also hid his irritation at the toothless tiger. “Thank you.”

Leaving the manse with Grey Wind following him, Robb wanted to leave the Black Walls as soon
as possible, even though Malaquo told him that he could come back and only needed to mention his
name. *Maybe this is why my father struggled at King’s Landing. How can you deal with those who
for too long thought themselves above others?*

Once Robb found and hired the Company of the Rose, he was going to leave Volantis as soon as he
could. *Maybe I could find the Wolf Pack if I have the time and know where to look.*

As he finally exited the Black Walls, he bumped into an older man, who dropped a chest as a
result.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Robb moved to pick up the chest, only the man to wave him away.

“It’s all right, good ser. And please don’t touch anything. I have the greyscale.”

Robb immediately stepped back, not wanting to contract the disease, but he also got a good look at
the man. Dressed like a sellsword with red-wolf skin cloak, he had blue hair, but his eyebrows and
beard were red. He could also see in his eyes that this was a man experienced with the hardships of
life, and he saw that his hand was indeed infected with the greyscale.

Picking up the chest, the blue-haired man looked at Robb with curiosity. “Are you from
Westeros?”

“Yes. You appear to be so,” Robb told him.

“That’s a mighty big wolf you have there,” the blue-haired man pointed to Grey Wind. “Where did
you get it?”

“It was a gift,” Robb answered.

“What brings a man from Westeros into the Black Walls?” the blue-haired man asked.

“I was invited. What about you?”

“So am I, although I’ve been invited more than you have,” the blue-haired man noted. “Well, I
must be off now. What’s your name, good ser?”

Although Malaquo knew his real name, Robb didn’t trust anyone else with it. “Brandon. Brandon
Rivers,” he thought of his dead uncle and didn’t want to reveal his northern origins.

The blue-haired man nodded, as if those names meant something to him. “Well met, Brandon.
Good to see another Westerosi all the way.”

“What’s your name, if I might ask?”

“Griff,” the blue-haired man turned on his heels and walked deeper into old Volantis.

“Griff… strange name,” Robb thought aloud as he and Grey Wind exited the Black Walls and
moved towards the one who had the services of the Company of the Rose.

But as he moved to the other side of the Long Bridge, he didn’t notice two red priestesses watching him closely. He got their attention the moment he was at that fountain, and his direwolf only confirmed their suspicions.

“He has no idea how much danger he’s in,” Kinvara talked to the other priestess. “He must live, as the Lord of Light wills.”

“What do you want me to do?” the other priestess asked.

“Follow him. Keep watch and make sure that no one tries to harm him. But also maintain your distance, as he’s not in a position to understand what is happening,” Kinvara commanded.

“It will be done. What about the one they call Aegon Targaryen and the Golden Company?”

“The Lord of Light wants Daenerys Targaryen to succeed. We’ll find a way to help steer things towards that resolution,” Kinvara said.

“And the tigers? They’re not going to stop trying to kill us, and they’re already planning to attack Meereen,” the other priestess pointed out.

“With strength exerted elsewhere comes weakness nearby,” Kinvara stated cryptically. “We will wait until that occurs.”

Walking back to her sanctuary, Kinvara looked into the flames one more time. Afterwards, she pulled out a glass candle and watched it burn, which began ever since the dragons returned. Whispering an invocation, she heard the voice of someone that she hadn’t heard from in many decades.

“Kinvara,” came the voice of Ardroon.

“Good to hear your voice again, Ardroon,” Kinvara greeted the shadow man. “I think the time has come for the next step. You have kept watch over Daeron Targaryen?”

“Close watch. He hasn’t noticed me yet,” came the response from the other end.

“Get into position. What I’ve seen will come to pass. You know what to do.”

“I do,” Ardroon affirmed. “I’ll let you know when it’s been done.”

“May the Lord of Light protect you, old friend.”

“You, too.”

Kinvara sat down and closed her eyes in thought. *Your will is everything, but we are not infallible. Please let your will and ours be one in the coming moons*, she prayed.

Margaery walked through the gardens of the Red Keep, having grown used to people addressing her as “Your Grace” and become accustomed to her new station as queen.

But today, Margaery noticed a certain change in the air. *It can’t have been from Joffrey*, she thought.

With each passing day, his flaws had compounded. He started drinking in large quantities and
spent most of his days with whores, while he wasn’t present at most small council meetings. *Just like his father. If people didn’t see him fit for kingship before, they certainly see it now*, Margaery scoffed.

After they were married and the bedding came, she lied back and prepared herself for what he would do, dreading that Joffrey would treat her the same way as Sansa Stark, who went missing after Tommen died. But the most unexpected thing happened. Joffrey couldn’t get his cock up for some reason after he pulled down his breeches and he must’ve drunk too much wine, for he fell asleep on the bed before he did anything else. She could clearly remember that she breathed a huge sigh of relief.

The moons that followed showed to her that the only reason Joffrey remained king was because Tywin and Cersei were the only ones propping him up, alongside Ser Kevan and Pycelle. And judging from the looks on their faces, Joffrey’s habits of drinking and whoring were not anything new that they just resigned themselves for another Robert Baratheon. *I don’t know if the rumors of his parentage are true, but he sure is acting like the fat stag.*

Margaery showed up at the Small Council chambers, where her father, Cersei, Tywin, Kevan, Pycelle, Qyburn, and Prince Oberyn were already seated. Receiving the usual glare from Cersei, she took her seat and the Small Council started their business.

The first matter to be discussed was the letter from Roose Bolton requesting assistance from the crown regarding the wildlings breaching the Wall.

“Why should we even listen to that turncoat?” Cersei exclaimed. “He’s our Warden of the North. Whatever happens in that ice waste doesn’t concern us.”

“That’s true, Your Grace, but the strength of the northmen has weakened in the aftermath of Robb Stark’s rebellion and thus, they don’t have the manpower to deal with one hundred thousand wildlings,” Kevan answered.

“If we ignore the request of one of our subordinates, the word of the crown will not mean much in the future and thus, people will have other ideas that will harm all of us here,” Tywin told her before turning to Qyburn. “What have your little birds have to say about the wildling threat?”

“My little birds have been rather silent regarding that area and the reports have been murky, Lord Hand,” the former maester answered him. “But I will agree that whether or not these are trained fighters, one hundred thousand wildlings breaching the Wall is something that we can’t afford to ignore. And should the Boltons be weakened, the North will be in danger of collapse and will inevitably threaten the south.”

“Kevan, how many men can we muster to assist Lord Bolton if he asks again?” Tywin asked his brother.

“I’d say about fifteen thousand from the west, as we cannot take from our commitments elsewhere. I will have to ask Lord Frey if he can spare troops also, as he is tied to the fate of the Boltons no matter what happens.”

“Do that. And remind him that we can unmake him as easily as we did,” Tywin commanded. “Lord Mace, I trust that we can rely on the Reach should the threat become more serious?”

“Yes, Lord Hand,” Mace nodded. “However, I doubt that the wildlings will advance very far.”

“Still, we must be prepared for every eventuality. But for now, we’ll see how Lord Bolton handles
the situation. Perhaps the wildlings will kill him for us before he sends for help again. Rids us of another turncoat,” Tywin moved on to the next order of business.

Throughout the small council meetings, it was usually Tywin that gave the orders and directed all of the topics. Despite being Lord Paramount of the Reach, Mace was very weak and unsuited for the rigors of politics.

And what Margaery really fearful was when Loras told her that Tywin knew about his liaison with Olyvar, but he stopped Cersei from exposing him. When Loras asked what he wanted, Tywin stood up, commanded Loras to kneel, and said, “Your unwavering, unquestioning loyalty.”

Margaery calmed down her brother and hugged him. “Just play along, Loras. Be a good servant to Tywin, as he will kill you the moment that he doesn’t see you as useful. But I’ll protect you also. I’ll make sure of it.”

The next order of business was the continuing rebellion of the stormlands. “How is your son doing regarding the stormlords?” Tywin turned once again to Mace Tyrell.

“Garlan has reported continued difficulty getting them to heel. Even though Stannis Baratheon might have lost at the Blackwater Bay, retreating to Storm’s End was probably the smartest thing he had done, as he is on his power base,” Mace explained.

Tywin nodded, as the head of House Tyrell made a sensible comment for once. “Kevan, does our commanders’ reports match what Lord Garlan has said?”

Kevan bobbed his head. “Very much. While they can’t get through Nightsong, our troops have been continuing to struggle in the kingswood. We only got as far as the northern bank of the Wendwater and they’ve dug deep on the southern bank.”

Despite being encircled, Stannis Baratheon had caused much trouble for the crown and had used the geography of the stormlands to maximum advantage. The Red Mountains and the Dornish Marches protected from the west and south, while the kingswood and Wendwater protected his northern approach.

“Why hasn’t Lord Paxter been able to bring down his ships to bear?” Tywin turned once again to Mace.

“Lord Hand, you asked for as many ships as he could spare, but he needs as much as he can retain to fight the ironborn reaving against our lands,” Mace mentioned. The small council were aware of the ironborn seizing parts of the Shield Islands and the Reachmen along any point of access by water were on alert.

With the Lannister and Tyrell bannermen stretched, Tywin turned to Oberyn, which he found distasteful given their conversation when he arrived in King’s Landing. “Prince Oberyn. Can Prince Doran spare some Dornishmen to fight against Stannis? We do have an agreement through my granddaughter.”

Cersei shook her head at Myrcella being in Sunspear, but everyone ignored what she thought.

“Given that Dorne has remained out of your War of Five Kings, we are in a position to provide fresh troops. But they will only do so if they feel threatened by Stannis Baratheon,” Oberyn answered.

“Surely, Stannis threatens us all. If he is still alive, House Martell will be in peril due to Princess Myrcella being tied to Trystane,” Pycelle pointed out.
“Whatever strength he can muster is focused against the rest of you, not at the Boneway or the Prince’s Pass,” Oberyn answered. “You’ll have to offer more compelling reasons for any Dornishmen to fight against the stormlanders, even though we have traditional animosity towards them from centuries of warfare.”

“All right,” Tywin was willing to hear Oberyn out. “What does Dorne, and your brother, require from us that we haven’t already given?”

“I believe I speak for my brother, and in fact all of us here, that wars are costly in coin and blood. There must be a fair exchange of both before one Dornishman bears arms alongside you lot,” Oberyn outlined.

“Ridiculous,” Cersei scoffed. “You expect us to pay you while you currently have my daughter in your family’s bed? I knew you were rash, but this is---”

“Done,” Tywin interrupted. “Have your brother send us the costs and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you, Lord Hand,” Oberyn gave a smirk to Cersei, with even Margaery amused.

The most serious order of the business, more than the continued haggling from the Iron Bank regarding the crown’s debt, came when they discussed the Targaryens in Essos.

“If the rumors are true, we have four dragons to deal with and their angry riders when they come back to Westeros,” Pycelle stated.

“My little birds have told me that there was an uprising against her rule in Meereen and she had disappeared on her dragon before they could kill her,” Qyburn added. “If she is smart, she’ll have realized the futility of ending slavery and not come back. What’s more, Meereen is under the regency of Tyrion and he’s not guaranteed to last long.”

Tywin, Cersei, and Kevan’s faces darkened at the mention of his name.

“But that will leave two more potential Targaryens, both of them male and thus more potent,” Mace stated. “And even if we could find some way to deal with one of them, that leaves the other. And this Daeron Targaryen is east of the Bone Mountains, way beyond the reach of any in this room.”

“Not exactly,” Qyburn answered.

“Do you have a solution to our problem?” Tywin turned to him.

“We can contact the Faceless Men and have them send someone after either the one calling himself Aegon or Daeron. But I must remind that with more distance comes more cost.”

Tywin thought about that for a moment. “We’ll talk later on that.”

After the small council adjourned, Margaery observed Prince Oberyn. For someone who had a closer connection to the Targaryens than anyone else in the room, he was strangely calm about the mention of Daenerys, Daeron, and his supposed nephew.

“Something on your mind, Prince Oberyn?” Margaery asked.

“Just thinking about the Targaryens. Either it’s an insulting mummery or the cruelest trick the gods played on my family.”
But Margaery paid close attention to his words. She expected more emotions from him, but he kept them back, which was something that he normally wouldn’t do. And that concerned her.

“Do you know something, Prince Oberyn? Something that you haven’t told the Small Council?” Margaery asked.

But Oberyn stood up from his seat. “Just talking about it rubs salt on the wound. Your Grace,” he bowed before he saw himself out.

*He evaded the question. There’s something else going on,* she thought.

Margaery told her grandmother what she observed from Prince Oberyn, as well as the other matters. “Hiring the Faceless Men to kill one or all of the supposed dragon pretenders is something only Tywin would do if he was really desperate,” Olenna told her. “But considering that he has more immediate problems to deal with, I doubt he would do that.”

“But won’t it be unwise if Tywin ignored the threat from Essos? He wouldn’t have the Mountain kill children if he didn’t regard them as threats,” Margaery posed.

“One of the things that Tywin is good at is waiting. He didn’t throw his strength against the Mad King until after Rhaegar fell at the Trident. And he didn’t approach us until after Renly died. He’s going to wait and see how the Targaryen situation transforms,” Olenna responded.

“Besides Tywin, what really made it strange was how Prince Oberyn reacted. I expected him to be more sensitive about the Targaryens given their history, but he was quiet,” Margaery brought up.

Olenna thought about this. “It could be possible that he is privy to his brother’s plans. After all, Doran Martell did say that he wanted one of his sons to marry Daenerys Targaryen and that could be why Oberyn was not expressive about it.”

“Maybe,” Margaery acceded. “But I get the feeling that something else is going on. It is known that Doran and Oberyn do not always see eye to eye, and Oberyn wasn’t really concerned about power.”

“I’ll have someone look into it. But on another matter. How is Loras doing?”

“He’s afraid,” Margaery admitted. “I never seen him so scared of anyone before, and he trembles at the very mention of Tywin.”

Olenna sighed in sympathy. “As cruel as this may sound, it’s good thing that Loras is not the only son of House Tyrell. And I was tempted to have him return to Highgarden as soon as I heard of what Tywin did, but it’s better to have him near us than away. At the very least, Tywin knows he can’t hurt Loras or our alliance will be broken.”

“Even though I did want to be queen, this alliance between our houses is becoming more troublesome with each day, especially with Joffrey on the throne,” Margaery groaned.

“Not all alliances are meant to be perfect. But we have the advantage because Tywin needs us. And I’m just waiting for the day that he makes his first big mistake, or Joffrey. Once they do, we can start finding alliances elsewhere. Since you still have your maidenhead, you can easily get out of the marriage when the time comes,” Olenna assessed.

Margaery didn’t like the idea of surrendering her crown but given that Tommen was dead and Joffrey was left, there were no good options.
“What about Cersei? It’s only because of Tywin that she hasn’t done anything serious against us?”

“There is a man who calls himself ‘a man of the people’, one they call the High Sparrow,” Olenna revealed. “Maybe we should see how he would react when I tell him of the rumors regarding Cersei.”

Margaery took a moment to know her meaning. “Ah,” Margaery finally understood. “True or not, the Faith will be in an uproar regarding incest.”

Olenna smiled. “Let’s see how that will turn out. We may yet damage the Lannisters without raising our own hands.”

Chapter End Notes

Sam’s meeting with May’s parents went as well as it went. But they’re not going to let strict parents stop them.

Khiara is now making her own preparations and who nows how exactly she’ll respond? The song is A-mei’s "Autosadism" (not an inspiring title, but I’d recommend it)

I felt that Vala had a BS fate in S6, so I gave the fate that she deserved. On the other hand, Dany will now have to face multiple threats. Can she meet them? And she’s even more confused about who Rhaenys really is.

Robb just met Malaquo, who I made Talisa’s uncle, and then JonCon. Oh, boy. Whatever Kinvara has concocted, it better be soon and helpful to the dragons. I told you that we'll the shadow man that Jon ran into again.

And here, we have our first King’s Landing scene. Why did Prince Oberyn act that way? (He's not dead, like Ser Barristan, both of whom were wasted characters). With Tywin alive but Joffrey in control, it's a struggle. I added more references from the books. And I figured that given Joffrey's personality, that's the only way he would act. And hopefully, Olenna’s plan doesn’t backfire. Also, Stannis doesn’t head north because there's no point without Jon and with the wildlings through the wall. However, him remaining at Storm's End will reveal another angle of the larger plot at play.

To speed things along, I had the Harpy Rebellion happen and now Dany's disappeared. Where will she end up is the next important question.

Hope you guys enjoyed!
Danger coming close...

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys are still safe and healthy. A lot of threads happening, so please bear with me. I am also going to be busy with a lot of stuff, so I don't think I can update as constantly as I did before. However, I will try to write as much as I can when I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya struggled to keep her balance on the pillars, all of which were quite narrow, and one slip would send her into the sewage water down below. She still had to get used to the stench, even though she smelled similar scents as she tried to escape Joffrey’s men after her father died.

On Khiara’s recommendation, Arya was sent to receive specialized training at an unmarked compound twenty miles east of Yin, inside the jungles. She would return every evening to the capital and spend most of the day there, where the master of the compound was a former shinobi, the term for assassins in Yi-Ti.

The shinobi were the bane of every lord and other powerful person in the empire, but it took the deaths of three emperors in different dynasties for the empire to really see the need for countering the assassin trade. The master of the compound killed at least a dozen lords in his heyday, so he knew what he was doing. Arya also heard that he cut a deal with the emperor and snitched on a lord trying to kill one of his ministers in exchange for protection and immunity for his crimes. He certainly seems to be an unsavory type, Arya thought.

However, Arya couldn’t complain, as the master did his job well in training her. Within a matter of weeks, she was able to obtain the basics of several evasion and escape techniques, all of which would have been useful when she was in hiding and named for fire, earth, water, and wood.

The first set of methods that she learned was called hitsuke, which was the practice of distracting guards by starting a fire away from her planned point of entry. What’s more, she had to do it on an actual castle, where the master would sneak in and burgle the lord after she set the fire. Once that was done, part of how the master made his coin was to inform the lord that he was robbed and to advise him on how to better protect his home. What a devious man, Arya had to admire how sneaky he was.

The second set of methods was called tanuki-gakure, which was the practice of climbing a tree and camouflaging oneself within the leaves. That involved stuffing her robes with them and painting her face to match the colors, and her first task was to rob unsuspecting travelers by jumping from the trees. Her first one was a married couple, in which she pushed the woman away and kicking the man in the groin before stealing his money. After she brought the money to the master, he would then emerge from hiding and return the coin plus compensate them. He’s got some interesting morals.

The third set was called ukigusa-gakure, which was the practice of throwing duckweed over water in order to conceal underwater movement. Now this was the trickiest for Arya, who never considered herself a water person. To master the practice, she had to learn how to swim and Arya treaded water during the first lesson. The master decided to hold that off until she was more comfortable in the water.
The last set was called uzura-gakure, which was the practice of curling into a ball and remaining motionless in order to appear like a stone. The entire concept seemed counterintuitive to Arya, as she didn’t think it would even work. But the master demonstrated by scaring some fishermen in the dark of night by acting like a boulder and stealing their fish, but he left behind some silver taels so that they could buy some at the market.

At the moment, Arya was learning how to fight while under strained circumstances, as the master told her that she would not enjoy favorable ground all the time. He added more motivation to maintain her balance by having her be above sewage water.

Arya was sounded by three men, all of whom were armed with bamboo sticks. She wasn’t supposed to fight back, only avoid falling in. Of course, that was easier said than done, as they always struck at her legs. The master told her, “You must have good roots, for your legs and your joints will always be your most vulnerable areas.”

As two of them struck at Arya’s arms and she waved them off, another hit her legs. Only her fast instincts, honed by Gong-Er, allowed her to grab onto the tops of the other pillars prevent her from falling.

“This is so annoying,” Arya grumbled as she stood back up. Taking a deep breath, she blocked the first two bamboo sticks with her forearms while kicking away the third. This repeated about eleven more times, by which her feet and her arms were really starting to feel sore. However, one of them accidentally struck her face, stunning her and making her lose balance. Only the timely response of another, accomplished by him jumping over the pillars and grabbing her torso, was she able to avoid falling and come back to the platform.

“Be very careful, Lady Stark,” the master reminded her. “Always expect the unexpected and be alert.”

“I know that,” Arya answered.

“You do understand why you are learning this?”

“I must understand how an assassin fights so that I can protect Her Highness from assassination.”

“Exactly. And they’re not going to exhibit restraint because you’re a woman. Give them even a small opening, they will exploit that and you will be killed. Same thing with other people.”

Arya sighed, as all of this could have maybe saved her family a lot of pain.

“From now on, I want you to go home by running back today.”

“What?” Arya was surprised.

“You heard me. I want you to run once every week, to and from here,” the master told her.

“Do you know how long that’s going to take?”

“I know. Running is good for your heart and your endurance. And it’s the ultimate journey against all the forces that want to tear you down. Each week needs a good reminder of that, so that’s what I want you to do.”

Arya took a few deep breaths before she began a steady pace back to Jon’s palace in Yin. What made it easier for her was that there was a road and she passed by other travelers, so she wasn’t alone. However, she quickly felt her lungs become strained and her breathing heavier, as she never
ran this far before in a single day.

And what made it crazier was that even though she was going at an easy pace, each hour that passed broke down her patience and made her want to go faster. However, the more effort she put in, the more heat she collected and the more she sweat. Considering that she carried no water, she slowed down. Still, by the time she came back, her skin was red from the head and she needed several buckets of cold water to be brought to her. And then she napped during the afternoon.

However, by the end of it, she felt lighter and stronger, and Arya resolved her to running more often.

Benjen completed his most recent meeting with his officers, going through the particular details of his investigation into the “disappeared brigades.” However, he was looking forward to spending more time with Mingyu, who was still at headquarters despite her contract with the army already expired. He enjoyed her company and how she made him feel like that he wasn’t alone. It was a feeling that he hadn’t felt ever since he went to the Wall and took on his chastity vows. It might have felt improper for a Stark to have a woman in the same place he lived, especially with a woman he wasn’t married to. But he didn’t want her to leave his company.

Remembering that she invited him to her quarters at the headquarters for another game, he made his way there and saw her shadow through the screen walls. Benjen knocked on her set of screen doors, which she opened and led into her quarters.

He took in her room, which still had her instruments. However, he smelled a pleasant scent and saw steam coming out from where her bath would be. He kept looking as she emerged, obviously just coming out from washing herself and dressing. She was still drying her hair and looking at Benjen.

Benjen didn’t know what it was, but there was something pure about her face without all of the linings and powder that she put on. Her face seemed pure and possessing a certain natural beauty that only a few women in the world could hope to have.

“Are you just going to keep staring at me like that?” she asked him.

Benjen cleared his throat. “I really like our conversations. I've been... regretting that my duties got in the way and that didn't continue... our conversations during the day.”

Mingyu chuckled. “Well, you are here now. I'm glad you want to see me.” She put down her rag and sat down in her chair. “It’s nice to see you. I enjoyed talking with you. I enjoyed having tea with you, very much, but I don't really talk to people. I especially don't see people in my quarters that much.”

Finding a washbowl, Benjen soaked his face and sat across Mingyu. He looked around the quarters once more. “If this is inappropriate... I can leave,” the Stark honor in him was screaming at him to not do this.

“No,” Mingyu shook her head. “It's not inappropriate. You’re a general, not someone trying to steal from a cupboard and certainly not a eunuch.”

“When will you be moving out from headquarters?”

“At the most, three weeks. I’m still waiting for General Lin to finalize my payment, which is taking some time,” Mingyu answered.
Benjen noticed a canvas, which had a woman drawn in yellow robes and a little girl half her height. “Both of them are very pretty.”

“That’s someone I held very dear in my heart,” Mingyu was vague. “But no, it’s not my mother.”

“Who is she?” Benjen asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Mingyu smiled before he set the canvas. “Would you like a cup of tea?” she held up her teapot and passed him a cup.

Benjen nodded. “Yes, I would. Thank you.”

Mingyu poured him a cup before she made her own. Clinking them, Benjen felt the warm essence of jasmine tea. His eyes then turned to a handful of books stacked near her bed.

“I read in my own free time, about certain things like family.”

“Really?” Benjen was surprised, as he didn’t assume her to be married and thus had a family of her own.

“Yeah. Might be useful when I do have one myself.”

_That’s a relief_, Benjen didn’t want to be pursuing a married woman.

“What was your family like, Lord Stark? I can see that you have a rare closeness with them that I haven’t seen in others.”

Benjen swallowed before he decided to talk about someone he never talked about in a while. “How well did you know your mother?”

“Not well,” Mingyu answered.

“My own mother was dead when I was still a child, but I remember her very well. She was a woman of strength, of integrity, and she gave me the most attention besides her only daughter, my sister. Maybe had she lived longer, the conflicts that my family had been through would not have started,” Benjen revealed.

“How so?” Mingyu put down her cup.

Benjen talked about Lyanna, her betrothal to Robert Baratheon, her running away with Rhaegar, the Rebellion, and he had to cover for her so that she could be with the one she loved. For some reason, revealing his thoughts to a stranger felt very… cathartic to him, since he didn’t know Mingyu very well and thus would have no opinion.

After Benjen finished explaining, he saw Mingyu’s eyes soften in sympathy. “Your sister sounds like a very fierce woman. I would have loved to meet her.”

“Thank you,” Benjen smiled.

“I must say that your vulnerability is something that I haven’t seen in any man, since everyone wants to feel strong but it’s refreshing for a man to reveal what’s in his heart,” Mingyu put her hand on his.

Benjen squeezed it. “Aye, it does. I’m just glad that you listened.”

Mingyu put his hand to her lips and kissed it softly, surprising him. She then stood up and kissed
her way up his arm. Her face got very close to his and they just stared into each other’s eyes. Feeling the intensity of the moment, Benjen leaned forward and kissed her.

The kiss became deeper while Mingyu jumped on his lap. He felt his hands untie her robe, reach inside, and push it away from her body. His eyes widened at how slim her body was and how round her breasts were. As if seeing his delight, Mingyu pulled up her skirt, exposing her intimate areas to him. Her fingers undid his trousers and pulled them down while they were still in his chair.

“You never been with a woman, haven’t you?” she whispered. Benjen was silent, remaining breathless as he looked upon the beauty that was fully exposed just for him. “Let me show what a beautiful woman could do.” She guided his cock to her entrance, and Benjen felt something so potent that all restrictive thoughts went away. As she had him thrust into her while tightening her arms around him, he looked up at the ceiling and could only allow the pleasure to rule him. Why did I not feel this before?

Ardroon made his way into the monastery in the Mountains of the Morn, the one that the locals referred to as the Dragon’s Cradle. After paying his respects to Abbot Cao, he journeyed up the mountain and the steps towards the cave. As he passed by the forest that lined his path, he caught a glimpse of the forest spirits called kodama. If they were present, it meant that the forest and the land was healthy.

But there were fewer kodama than he would have expected, which could only mean that the supposed health of the forest was in worse shape than it looked. Everything that had happened in the past few years, from that red comet he saw in the sky to the Jogos Nhai attempting to force their way south to avoid the harsh winter that the storm singers predicted, all pointed to a great evil that was emerging from the earth. Nothing since the great battle for the dawn has there been many omens, he thought.

Finding his way into the cave, he found a monkey-like spirit following him and making such strange sounds, but it only beckoned him to journey further. The further he went, the stronger the stench was. I have to do this.

Eventually, he came upon a subterranean part of the cave, which had a lake of some sort in front of him. Having read from what was to be done, he laid out a tray, set up an incense stick in a pot, and lit it. The strong scent hit his nose hard, but Ardroon knew what he had to do and bowed before the incense.

Ardroon then heard the surface of the lake ripple and something emerge from it. However, he kept his head down and averted his gaze while the golden and red dragon circled around him. I must not look at him.

He kept still as that dragon, a spirit from an ancient time, sniffed him. “Who are you?” it asked.

“No one,” Ardroon answered with reverence.

“Why do you not look at me?”

“I fear that I will incur your wrath if a low person like myself were to gaze upon your magnificence,” Ardroon said.

The dragon spirit sighed. “Well, certainly better than the last one I’ve met.”

“You are referring to the dragon prince?” Ardroon asked.
“How would you know that, low person?” the dragon spirit inquired.

“I’ve seen it in the flames, or at least a glimpse of it,” Ardroon stated.

“Oh… You must be one of those worshippers of the flames, the one who believes that the struggle between you and the Great Other will end with the coming of Azor Ahai,” the dragon spirit assessed.

“Yes, Your Reverence, but I cannot call myself red faith follower, for I believe in all beliefs that tell of the Lightbringer,” the shadow man nodded while keeping his eyes to the ground.

“I knew the man you call Azor Ahai thousands of years ago. The first time that I saw him, I didn’t believe that he was going to do much with his life. But alas, fate has a funny way to defy expectations.”

Ardroon felt his breath hitch, as he was speaking with the one who had met the Lightbringer. “It does indeed.”

“And strangely enough, I’ve met someone only recently who reminds me so much of the Lightbringer. I was the one that hatched his dragon for him,” the dragon spirit noted.

“You are referring to Daeron Targaryen, Third of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm?”

“How pretentious,” the dragon spirit noted. “Didn’t know that grand titles had to be so long. Is he claiming himself to be a king now?”

“No, Your Magnificence. But he knows that he has to soon.”

“Being king doesn’t solve everything. I’ve seen kings and emperors come and go like breaths exhaled from the earth, and they all believe that they did something great for their lands and peoples, but many a time do their names disappear from history, just like the Lightbringer.”

“Not this one,” Ardroon shook his head. “He has the power and the will to finally defeat the great evil and bring the light back to the world, but he must understand his part.”

“Tell me, common man. What do you know of your part in the grand scheme of things?” the dragon spirit asked. “Your kind, many of them, go through their life without knowing their purpose. To one’s place in the order of things is a great blessing.”

At the beginning of his life, Ardroon didn’t consider himself a man with a strong belief in the supernatural. He was content with his life as a berserker in the Shadow Lands and raiding along the coasts of Jinqi. However, there was one who showed him a better way to live than to simply take from others because he could, and he hadn’t seen her for decades.

Ardroon couldn’t say that he loved Melisandre, for that would be a common response for those who helped others see their purpose. And the shadow man knew that Melisandre was set on a path that he couldn’t follow, so he watched her journey westwards and onto the path of Stannis Baratheon. The only way he could contact her, if they needed to, was by the glass candle. Only recently was he reminded of his purpose by Kinvara.

“I have lived an aimless existence, and it was only with the intervention of someone dear to me that I was able to discover my purpose.”

“And what is it?” The dragon spirit wanted to know.
“The one who helped me said that our flesh was a mere vessel, to be used for the purpose of carrying souls. And I believe that my ultimate use in this life is to carry a soul in my body, for the cause against the great evil demands it,” Ardroon answered.

“I’ve heard this so many times. One last struggle against evil and so on. Why should this be any different?”

“You said yourself that you saw a part of the Lightbringer in Daeron Targaryen. However, for him to fulfill that purpose, to really carry the light in him, he must undergo a great trial, one that he cannot hope to complete without help. And he’s going to need myself and you.”

The dragon spirit balked at that. “And why would I help man continue their struggles against an evil that will always return? Why should I help them, when all they do is squabble against each other over scraps? None of them have any ambition for the future, and no aspiration for the true divine. I’ll be wasting my time and my energy being involved.”

“Please indulge me. What did you see in Daeron Targaryen that reminded you of the Lightbringer?”

The dragon spirit exhaled. “I sensed him as loyal to a fault, honest, brave, and committed to honor. Moreover, I saw that he was willing to apply himself to a cause that went beyond his personal self. It’s rare to find those like that in any period and in any time.”

“But why do you hesitate, if I might ask?”

“I asked him if he was able to live with the consequences of his actions, and he might have said yes. But he’s still young and inexperienced with the hardships of the world. That served to the detriment of the Lightbringer, who hesitated in killing his wife. One more moment wasted and the world would have ended, but luckily, his wife knew what needed to be done and urged him on.”

“You don’t think Daeron Targaryen is capable of doing that?”

“He values his family, which is a nice thing to have, but sometimes, one has to make sacrifices for the greater good. Sometimes, a triumph is indifferent towards individual feelings and actions.”

“And he will understand that eventually, but he won’t learn by himself. He needs the presence of the both of us for that to happen,” Ardroon explained.

“If I do agree to help you and Daeron Targaryen, what exactly would you have me do?”

“I would perform a ritual known only in Mossovy, where a divine entity would enter my mind and take control. You will then come down with me to the south and into Yin, where we will encounter Daeron Targaryen. Our presence there will help us help him with his incoming trial,” Ardroon answered.

“You seem very sure about me helping you. Give me one good reason that I should,” the dragon spirit posed.

Ardroon took some time to formulate his answer. “You say all of those things about men, that we’re petty, selfish, blind. I agree with all of them and that’s what I only believed for half of my life. But I saw that we are more than what you’ve just said, that there are those who really care about others and are willing to put themselves on the line for a greater purpose. The reason why we remember the Lightbringer was because he did what was needed, putting aside his desires, and the world enjoyed the dawn. But Daeron Targaryen must finish what his predecessor had started, and he must be able to focus on something truly above himself if he is to bring that. He must first truly
be free of life’s restraints and fully embrace the nature of all of his ancestors. Daeron Targaryen can bring about the everlasting dawn for generations after and the foul evil will be over, and many more will thank him."

The dragon spirit listened closely. “Pretty good speech you concocted there.”

“And I don’t know what it’s like to be a deity, but aren’t you tired of living like this? Seeing many come and go but unable to really influence their existences? Surely, whoever created you didn’t intend for you to be so idle,” Ardroon take another step, but he didn’t see how uncomfortable that made the dragon spirit feel.

The dragon spirit sighed. “Well, I have to tell you this. You came more prepared than the dragon prince.”

“Thank you, Your Reverence.”

“And I’ve been meaning to get out of his mountain for eons, but I haven’t had a good reason. Do your ritual, then.” Remembering what he learned about the shapechanging rituals unique to Mossovy, he lit another incense stick and began the first of many incantations in an ancient tongue long lost to the speaking world. Other parts of the ritual involved him whirling and twirling around his arms, getting his arms and legs onto the ground in various forms of violent prostrations, and chanting more incantations to the spirit. The effects of these chants were to provide protection against spear and fire and all forms of outside attack, among other things.

Suddenly, a wind blew from through the cave, extinguishing the smoke rising from the incense stick. Ardroon stopped moving around as he felt a powerful presence enter his body. It was excruciatingly painful, as he fell back on the ground and rolled around in pain. The monkey spirit looked on with nervousness, as the dragon spirit’s form had disappeared into air.

Eventually, Ardroon stopped struggling and he got back up. But in his mind, he felt someone else controlling his arms, legs, and breathing. Looking down at his limbs, he noticed something strange about them. They were paler than before, all of his scars and cuts had been wiped away, and he felt some disgust about their fragility.

“When the task you want done is done, I will return your body to you,” the dragon spirit told him on the inside. “Just don’t make me regret wasting my time by your persuasions.”

Ardroon didn’t have to say anything, for the dragon spirit could read all of his inner thoughts. Walking through the Dragon’s Cradle without a word, the body of Ardroon began the journey back south, towards Yin, towards the fulfilling of Ardroon’s purpose in the world.

Arianne sat in the hall of Sunspear as she awaited her father to enter. Long had she been privy to the inner workings of the Dornish court and her father’s dealings with them, but with the onset of his gout and his rare appearances in public, she started to have a lesser opinion of her father than before. But whatever I think, he is still my father.

Sunspear had sent a raven to King’s Landing in response to her uncle Oberyn’s informing them that Tywin Lannister was willing to pay most of the costs it would take to send Dornish spears to the stormlands and fight against Stannis. She found it… embarrassing to the say the least that House Martell was consorting with the ones who were responsible for her dead aunt’s death and wanted to avenge them as much as any other, especially her aunt Ellaria and her cousins the Sand Snakes. And her father’s reasoning in defense of his actions did not do much to convince him that he shared the same goal.
However, it seemed as if her uncle in King’s Landing and her father were trying to bleed the Lannisters dry by having them cover much of the costs for their armies to be sent against Stannis Baratheon, as the crown was in deep debt. *Maybe my father and uncle are onto something there,* she thought.

But her father wouldn’t summon her and Trystane to a private conversation just to discuss financial matters, especially since he didn’t invite Myrcella and Quentyn. *What’s going on here?*

Trystane came first. “Dear sister,” he smiled to her.

“Trys,” she grinned back.

“Why did father want us here? And where’s Quentyn?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him when we were breaking our fast,” Arianne answered him.

“I have to admit. Life can be very boring without our illustrious cousins and with our brother gone,” Trystane said with sadness.

“I too agree,” Arianne put her hand on his. “If only this war would end, then we can all be a family again. And after the ones who murdered Elia are punished.”

Before Trystane could respond, they saw their father enter on his wheelchair, escorted by Ateo Hotah. “My children,” Doran Martell greeted them happily.

“Father,” Arianne kissed his cheek while Trystane squeezed his hand.

“Sit down,” Doran gestured to them. “I am sure that you have heard that I have decided to send ten thousand Dornish spears to the stormlands, with their first goal being to seize the Dornish Marches over there. The crown has agreed to cover over three quarters of our expenses.”

“Is that a wise course of action, father?” Trystane was concerned. “Dorne might not take too kindly that you have involved our people in someone else’s war, especially with those who have desecrated Aunt Elia.”

“It’s all part of the larger plan, son,” Doran answered. “While I take gold from the Lannisters, I will help them eliminate one more claimant to the Iron Throne, thus paving the way for our revenge and our final goal.”

“Which goal do you speak of, father?” Trystane asked.

“Where did you send Quentyn?” Arianne had to know.

“You’ve asked the first important question. Where did I send your brother?” Doran smiled with pride. “He’s currently on a ship to Slaver’s Bay, to Tollos exactly.”

“Why’s he going over there?” Trystane asked.

“Because that is where the Golden Company will be, as well as their client,” Doran answered.

“Why would our brother want to know the Golden Company’s client?”

Arianne figured it out. “I’ve heard rumors from across the narrow sea, that Elia’s son by Rhaegar Targaryen, little Aegon, is in fact alive under the alias ‘Young Griff’ and is gathering men and coin to press his claim on the throne.”
Doran nodded. “Exactly. And it is no farce, for I have proof that not only Aegon is alive, but Rhaenys too.”

Trystane’s and Arianne’s mouths dropped. “What?”

“Here is a letter from Varys confirming their survival and the plans to press their claim on the Iron Throne,” Doran pulled out a folded paper from his robes and read it aloud.

“To Prince Doran Martell,

I am pleased to inform you that your tribulations will not be in vain. Your nephew and niece from Elia’s womb, Aegon and Rhaenys, have in fact survived and had been in hiding in Essos for these past twenty years. For their own safety, I had to separate them to make it more difficult for the stag usurpers to find them, but they are the true heirs of House Targaryen.

Your nephew Aegon has been under the care of Jon Connington all this time and had to assume another name. But despite his silver hair being dyed blue, he is of good Valyrian stock and is now currently in Volantis to accompany the forces of Malaquo Maegyr and the tigers in their upcoming war against Daenerys Targaryen, who is still missing as of this letter.

Your niece Rhaenys is every inch of the beauty your sister had, except for her purple eyes, and she has been trained rigorously with the Dornish spear and scimitar. And she is not naïve to the ways of the world and her maidenhead is intact despite being made to hide in a Lysene pillow house. She is currently with me in Tollos.

I invite one of your blood to sail to me in Tollos, where we can initiate a plan to bring the Targaryens of Martell blood onto the throne. When the time is right, I will arrange for Aegon to marry a Dornish lady or marry his sister in true dragon custom. Once all pretenders are dealt with, which are Daenerys and Daeron Targaryen at this moment, we shall sail westwards with our combined armies and begin the campaign. You may not worry about how I deal with the supposed bastard of Stark blood, for I have a plan in place.

May the dragons return to rule and the Martells to stand besides them.

Signed,

Varys.”

Arianne could feel nothing but shock that her Targaryen cousins were in fact alive. It felt like the Seven had deemed fit to smile on them and grant them a blessing in the midst of a bleak world.

“This is great news, as you all should feel,” Doran smiled, as did Trystane. “With Aegon and Rhaenys on our side, your cousins, we will be in a position to finally take vengeance on those that wronged us.”

“And our part is to eliminate Stannis and thus make way for them?” Arianne asked.

“As I said, it’s all part of the plan and we must do our part. Quentyn will make sure that Varys will keep his end of the bargain, especially when it comes to Daeron Targaryen.”

Arianne had heard of this Daeron Targaryen, named after the Young Dragon and the supposed son of Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark. But to hear Varys talk about him meant that Daeron’s existence was no mummerry. And the name itself was distasteful in all Dornish mouths, as it reminded them of the humiliation their ancestors felt at his conquest.
“What do you wish for us to do, father?” Trystane inquired.

“Son, it’s time that you lead troops into battle. Go to Wyl and oversee the preparations on my behalf,” Doran directed him.

“And myself?” Arianne wanted to know her role.

“I need you here to ensure that everyone is reminded of their part, including your uncle’s. You are to be my heir, but you must learn how to operate yourself in my role. Learn it.”

However, Arianne knew that her father much preferred Quentyn to succeed him, which was why he was given such an important role to sail to Tollos. At the same time, she was going to prove him wrong.

“I won’t let you down, father,” she answered.

“Excellent. Today begins the quest in which we take what is owed to us,” Doran declared.

Robb came upon the place where the man who hired the Company of the Rose lived, whose name was Jaenyra Vhassar, niece of Nyessos Vhassar, one of the Volantene triarchs and of the elephant party. Although the elephants preferred trade to war, the Vhassar’s wealth was reliant on the slave trade and thus had much to lose if Daenerys Targaryen succeeded in eradicating slavery in Slaver’s Bay.

The more he heard of Daenerys, the more Robb became more ambivalent of the daughter of the Mad King, the murderer of his grandfather and uncle Brandon, whose name he adopted. She might have been a dragon, but he had to admit that she was doing good things for many people, as no one should live in bondage. He certainly had heard of Targaryens who did good for the realm and for many peoples, but he also learned about the Targaryen madness. *I cannot judge Daenerys Targaryen so quickly, but I can’t think well of her either just yet.*

Robb introduced himself to the servant guarding Jaenyra’s house. He had to turn in Ice, but he insisted on Grey Wind coming with him. The servant then told him that he could enter.

There was something simplistic about this house, as it was not within the Black Walls, and that already said much about this Jaenyra. However, Robb was going to reserve judgment until much later. He then arrived at her hall, where a young woman was sitting on her couch.

If Robb had to compare Jaenyra with Talisa, the former would have been considered much plainer. Still, there would be men who would lust over her and want to enter her bed. *But not again. Not after last time. Not for a while,* he promised himself, as his honorable instincts and attraction to his wife got her killed and him into self-imposed exile.

“I know who you are, Robb Stark, so let’s skip the pleasantries. Why have you come here?”

*Finally. Someone who can cut through the bullshit,* Robb thought with relief. “I seek to hire the Company of the Rose from your hands.”

Jaenyra crossed her arms. “And why would I do that? I already paid for their service.”

“And I am willing to buy their contract from your hands, my lady.”

“What’s your purpose of hiring them, if I even agree?”
“I am looking for men to take with me back to Westeros to avenge my family, but I need sellswords who also had a bond with my land,” Robb answered.

“Right. The old tradition of Westerosi lordlings, or former kings in your instance, hiring sellswords out of desperation,” Jaenyra said to herself, which struck Robb. She’s sharp. “I need the men for protection, because I don’t trust my uncle to leave me alone because I chose not to be involved in his war.”

“Why do you go against your uncle, if I may ask? Won’t slavery’s end be the end of your fortunes?”

“I am against the idea of slavery, even though I still enjoy the fruits of their imposed labor,” Jaenyra admitted. “However, I can understand my own hypocrisy in not doing much and there’s nothing much I can do.”

Robb nodded in understanding. “Westeros has no slaves, but I wanted a better life for my family and my people because I didn’t want to be practically slaves to a murderous child. And I am not done fighting. That’s why I need the Company of the Rose, for they understand well that to leave is better than to submit.”

Jaenyra blinked. “Who’s going to protect me then?”

“I will not leave Volantis so prematurely once I hired them. As long as they are here, they will continue their original contract. I am willing to make a partial payment to you, and you’ll receive the rest when we leave the city,” Robb offered.

Jaenyra thought it through before nodding. “Sounds acceptable. But let’s see what Captain Moss has to say about that.” She ordered the servants to bring in the Captain-General of the Company of the Rose, which Robb had only heard of until now.

In came a man who was clearly Westerosi, but his skin was tanned, and he had a black beard and an eyepatch over his eye. He must’ve seen some serious battles in his prime, Robb noted.

“Who is this?” Moss spoke in the common tongue, which was obviously not of a northern brogue.

“This is Robb Stark, son of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North,” Jaenyra introduced him.

Moss scoffed. “A Stark all the way, and an exiled king at that? What does he want?”

“He wants to hire you to help him fight in his war,” Jaenyra answered.

“And what is he going to offer us? Land? Money? No thanks,” Moss turned to leave, but Robb grabbed his shoulder.

“At least hear me out, good ser,” Robb pleaded, but Captain Moss shook his hand off.

“Piss off. My ancestors left you when Torrhen Stark bent the knee to the dragon and I will not tolerate your presence any longer. Even though you didn’t bend the knee, you might as well, considering how you’ve performed.”

Robb cleared his throat. “You’re right. Torrhen Stark did bend the knee and it’s not like I acted any differently with the mistakes that I made. But here’s one thing that you’re not understanding. Hardships can teach us much about ourselves and I am still young, so I still have much time to learn about what kind of man I am.”
“Spare me the sentimentalities, Stark. What’s your point?”

“Don’t you want to go home, the home that calls to you, the land that gives you a sense of identity?” Robb asked, which made Moss freeze. “You might have lived in Essos your entire life, but don’t you have that feeling that you never belonged here? I want my home back and I know that I can’t live here even if I tried. Forget land and coin. I am offering you a chance to go back to where your ancestors had originated from, a chance to not wander anymore.”

Moss turned around, and Robb could see that his gaze had softened considerably. *I got to him.*

“Where are you staying, Stark?”

“I can go back to my ship.”

“My lady,” Moss turned to Jaenyra. “Can you please spare Stark some chambers? I need to speak to my lieutenants and get their opinion on what he’s offering.”

“Of course,” Jaenyra nodded, as Moss left. “Is your gold on the ship, I reckon?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have someone collect it and bring it here. Cayn Moss is an honest man, which I find a very valuable commodity,” Jaenyra stated.

“Thank you, for your hospitality,” Robb said to her.

“Just be careful,” Jaenyra warned him.

As Robb looked out on the balcony of Jaenyra’s house, he noticed a few men watching him from below. *Probably Malaquo’s creatures,* he thought scornfully.

But he didn’t see the red priest and priestess in disguise, who were also eyeing the men watching Robb in Jaenyra’s house.

“Shouldn’t we do something? They’re going to harm him if he tries anything,” the priest said aloud.

“Not yet. Malaquo’s fleets and armies must depart for our plan to succeed, and the Golden Company with Jon Connington and the Young Griff must also leave Volantis,” the priestess outlined. “Once they’re all gone, that’s when strike and protect Robb while ensuring he leaves with what he needs.”

“But when can we act?”

“Kinvara has a plan, the fires tell us what it is, but we must be patient. If we act too early or late, it’ll all unfold. It must be done at the right moment,” the priestess responded.

“How will we know?”

The priestess looked at Robb, who had no idea of his role in the coming struggles ahead. “The Lord of Light will show us when.”

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Jon sat at his new desk in the capital garrison headquarters. Quartermaster Choi told him that due to his good work in his previous post, he was going to be assigned as the overseer of information, making him the intermediary between Lord Buko, the quartermaster, and everyone else who gave
tips in exchange for coin. His job was to cross-reference all of the tips against known sources of information and if there was strong corroboration between them, he will send it up the chain of command.

Although this was a promotion since he would no longer be an assistant, Jon suspected that his investigation into the “disappeared brigades” made too many people nervous. But because they couldn’t harm him, they simply had him sent to another post where he wouldn’t be able to pursue his investigation with the same zeal that he had. Moreover, whenever there’s a change in post, he had to turn over all of his papers to his commanding officer, which Jon instantly figured out that they would try to bury the issue.

However, Jon had anticipated that someone would try to block him and had thus made copies, all of which he kept under lock and key at his palace. As the decision was final, he wasn’t going to try to fight it, but instead found his reassignment as a blessing in disguise, as he now had direct access to the sources of information and could influence which to send up to the commanders. Meanwhile, he would continue his investigation however he could, although he would now have to be very careful since someone was definitely watching him now.

One of the informants that he met was a farrier for a prominent merchant down at the docks. He told Jon that there was increased activity among the gangs there and that their leader, only known by the name “Wah,” was tightening up on everyone’s discipline.

“How did you approach me? Why not inform the constabulary or even the Central Column?” Jon asked him.

“I don’t trust those men. Wah has every local constable down at the docks in his pocket and no one snitches on him or his gang without suffering the consequences,” the farrier answered.

Jon sighed, as the whole theme about corruption in the ranks was getting so boring. “All right. I’ll inform the constables then. Whether or not they choose to act on it, I cannot tell. Take you coin,” he gave him ten silver taels for his troubles.

Finishing his meetings and submitting his report to Lord Buko’s adjutant, Jon arrived at the training compound, where he would see the final phase of Gendry’s testing.

After passing through the basic training, he had Gendry study rigorously for the exam, with only the evenings allowing him to rest and recuperate. Besides learning the tongues well, he had to have knowledge of tactics, strategy, and organization if he wanted to pass and receive his commission. Jon also tested Gendry on his knowledge of the passages from the general’s text, the one all commanders had to know by heart. Once Gendry got an endorsement from both Jon and Lord Joon, he received a place on which to test his knowledge and receive his commission after he passed.

The military version of the examinations consisted of three parts, held over three days. The first part was horseback archery. Gendry was given nine arrows and he had to hit at least three targets on the course in three laps or less. Jon had to rigorously train Gendry how to ride a horse well and to use the bow and arrow. He struggled with the last part since archery was not among his strengths, but Jon told him that it was necessary if he wanted to pass. He then heard that Gendry was able to land four arrows on the target.

The second part was divided into two sections. The first dealt with archery from a stationary position, which was essentially testing how accurate Gendry was, and he barely passed that one. But the second part tested his strength and had three parts to it: bow drawing, sword waving, and stone lifting. Gendry had to draw back the bow at three different positions, the last one being how far he could take it back without breaking it. Gendry had to then wave three different types of
swords, each weighing in successively heavier weights, and slash against a straw dummy. As for
the stones, they weighed at eighty, one hundred and twenty, and one hundred and eighty pounds,
and he had to carry all of them over a half a mile. Gendry performed that test better than the other
parts.

The third part of the exams was the written test, which really challenged Gendry since he didn’t
even know how to read and write from an early age and didn’t really consider himself a learned
man. He had to make comments on the usage of strategy and tactical formations while he had to be
aware of areas such as astronomy, topography, and the art of the black powder, all of which really
pushed his mind to the limit. Unlike in Westeros, knowledge from books was highly valued and
someone told him, “We don’t need dumb brutes in our army and government.”

Speaking of which, after Jon was satisfied with how much progress the Hound made in his recover
from his opium addiction, he asked Lord Joon to find him a place where his fighting skills could be
put to good use. He told him that the demon hunters in Mossovy and the men at the Five Forts
could use someone of his skills, although Jon suspected that Lord Joon didn’t take a liking to the
Hound and wanted him far away as possible.

When he told the Hound this, Sandor merely shrugged. “Lord Joon told me that the Guardian of
the Five Forts is willing to pay a handsome fee for every raider and demon you kill.”

“I don’t want his money,” Sandor shook his head.

“Maybe I should spell this out for you,” Jon leaned forward on the table. “I might have given you
shelter, but the others in the capital do not welcome you. And I told you that you couldn’t just sit
around and do nothing. You’re not a commander, you’re no scholar, and you don’t really have
anything to offer besides your ability to kill. Do you understand now?”

“I don’t want to leave the capital so soon,” Sandor answered.

“Is there a reason why?”

“I…” The Hound scratched his head. “There is someone that I don’t want to leave here all alone. If
I go to the Five Forts, I might not see her again.”

“Who are you talking about?” Jon asked, although it didn’t take him long to figure out who,
considering it was the only other woman Sandor interacted with in Yi-Ti. “It’s the physician, isn’t
she?”

“Yes,” the Hound nodded. “I asked for tea since I’m not her patient anymore and she agreed to see
me.”

I see where this is going. Jon was amazed that the Hound was even capable of feeling fondness
towards anyone. “All right. But understand that you cannot live for free in my palace forever. Keep
that in mind.”

“Understood,” the Hound replied gratefully.

Going back to the training ground, Jon had to wait outside since the test was still in progress. A
few minutes later, someone came out and approached him. “Your Highness,” he addressed Jon.

“How did he do?” he referred to Gendry.

“He wasn’t outstanding, but he passed, Your Highness. He’ll be commissioned tonight.”
Jon sighed in relief that his efforts had paid off. He told Arya the good news, who could only smile at his accomplishment. She, himself, and Sam all showed up at the ceremony, which would be overseen by Prince Kaijin himself.

Although a small audience, it had all of the official trappings and someone sent from the Grand Secretary was present, as Gendry would be the first white devil in centuries to even complete the imperial examination.

Gendry dressed in his best armor and robes, approached Prince Kaijin, and bowed. “Gendry of King’s Landing in Westeros, reporting for duty.”

“Stand easy,” Kaijin said. As a prince, he held the rank of lieutenant-general in the army and reported directly to the Emperor’s Master of the Foot. The ceremony included Kaijin listing out what Gendry achieved and commanding him to serve the emperor to the best of his abilities and so on. The ceremony ended with him getting an officer’s sword and stripes. “In the name of the emperor, I hereby appoint you to the rank of lieutenant and hereby welcome you into the army. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Gendry answered. After the ceremony ended, he was congratulated by Arya, Sam, and then Jon.

“Well done, lieutenant. How does it feel?” he asked him.

“I don’t know if I am ready for this, Your Highness,” Gendry replied.

“I know what you mean,” Jon patted his shoulder. “But enjoy it now. You’ve just taken a step into a whole new world.”

As they were going back to his palace to celebrate, they were approached by one of Khiara’s servants. “Your Highness,” she addressed Jon.

“What can I do for you?”

“Her Highness wants to congratulate your cousin on obtaining his officer’s commission and has invited you all to celebrate at her palace. There will be food, music, drinks, and more waiting for you.”

Jon, Gendry, Arya, and Sam looked at each other nervously, as it was obvious that she didn’t care about Gendry at all and only used it as an excuse to get close to Jon. However, they couldn’t just refuse, so they followed the servant back to their palace.

As she said, there was a feast awaiting them and Khiara was happy to play the host.

Gendry was initially reluctant to loosen up, as this was the first time that he was in the presence of a ruling family member who wasn’t out to kill him. However, after drinking the arakju and realizing how good the food was, he smiled and enjoyed himself. His still broken guanhua made many laugh, but Gendry did his best to just smile.

Arya was with her friends in the Jade Order as they played music for the party eventually, but she eyed Gendry and was quite amused that he was doing very well to ingratiate himself. *My sister falling for a young officer… why does that sound familiar?*

Sam, as always, was showing himself as a great person to have in a Yi-Tish feast, as he charmed many with his mastery of guanhua and his wit. *By the gods, Sam, you’ve come very far from when I first met you.*
“Enjoying yourself, Prince Daeron?” Khiara poured him a drink.

“Quite,” Jon smiled as he took his cup and drank.

“Your cousin seems to be enjoying himself,” Khiara observed.

“Yes,” Jon agreed.

“Let’s hope he won’t be like this father, if what I heard about him was true,” Khiara chuckled.

Jon grinned. “I hope so also. He’s turning out much better already, though.”

“A young lieutenant… he’s going to be facing all sorts of trouble now.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jon put his cup down.

“Gendry is the first white devil in centuries to pass the examinations and he’s the first one to become a commissioned officer through the regular channels. I’m not going to say that Yi-Ti is highly against outsiders, but there are such things called turfs. Gendry passing the examinations despite all expectations will really make many uncomfortable,” Khiara explained.

Jon groaned. “Gods, this is so boring.”

“And I agree. It’s time that the empire received some new blood, as your inclusion into the political workings has shown that many things have to change if the Golden Empire wishes to survive.”

Jon had to appreciate Khiara’s forward thinking, but he also knew that whatever she wanted to do was going to face stiff resistance from the more traditionally minded individuals at court.

“As we’re on the topic of the empire, I believe it’s time that you chose sides,” Khiara stated.

Jon blinked in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

“Do you understand how much danger you are in, especially since your investigation began?”

“I know that I am under watch, and that whoever is benefitting from what I am still investigating somehow got me reassigned because they didn’t want me to get closer to the truth,” Jon answered.

“That’s not the most important parts,” Khiara revealed. “The Central Column and all constables working out of uniform are watching you and your family and friends in case you seriously threaten them. I have people in the Ministry of Justice and they got me the list, which has your name on it.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Not only that, I hear that someone wants to do harm on you and your uncle, because your morality is threatening their livelihood,” she added.

“I’m doing what’s right and I am prepared for the consequences,” Jon responded.

“Are you?” Khiara asked. “I am sorry to say this, but even though you have a direwolf and a dragon, you don’t have a lot of power by yourself. You are vulnerable and part of the reason why you lasted this long was because of me.”

“I didn’t ask you to protect me,” Jon pointed out.
“But you wouldn’t have survived without me,” Khiara shot back.

“What is your point?”

“I sense a great conflict coming between myself, the Prime Minister, and all others who want to usurp my family. At the moment, I can hold them back, but they will make the first move and I don’t have the strength to fight them forever. The balance that you observed in this capital will not last forever,” Khiara told him.

Jon turned his face more towards her. “Princess Khiara, are you suggesting a partnership between us?”

“Call it an alliance. I have the power and you have the dragon and direwolf. Together, we’ll be able to stave off our attackers and be ready to fight when the moment comes. You cannot be on your own side, Prince Daeron, and you need as much help as you can get to protect the ones you care about. With our bond, our chances of staying alive will increase dramatically,” Khiara offered.

Jon was not stupid in seeing the benefits of an open alliance with Khiara, but like all things, it didn’t come for free.

“In return?” Jon asked for her terms.

Unexpectedly, Khiara put her hands on his own. “You know what it was like to be with a woman. I want you to show me what you learned, when you come to my chambers tonight.”

Jon tried to slide his hands away from hers, immediately growing uncomfortable at her proposition, but she kept a firm hold on them. Arya and Sam began to notice with worry.

“Why do you recoil? Am I so evil to you?”

“No,” Jon shook his head. “You are beautiful, and you have much to offer me as much I to you. However, what you are suggesting is improper, for my heart belongs to another.”

“Surely not that Chogo woman. Your feelings for her, I can tell, were pure, but you have to move on from the dead,” Khiara said.

“No,” Jon refuted. “I don’t believe that you have met her, but there’s only one type of person that can match a dragonwolf and sadly, you are not one of them.”

However, he was wrong to think that Khiara would be discouraged. If there was one thing that he still had to understand, she wouldn’t have gotten very far if she cowered at every challenge.

“It’s Daenerys Targaryen, isn’t it?”

Once again, Jon marveled at how her mind worked.

“I’m not going to ask how you know her, because there are many things that I don’t understand yet and have no intention of exerting myself unnecessarily on matters that don’t really concern me, but if that’s the case, then do you really think that you can please a woman who has been seriously touched by power, someone who knows how to navigate through the corridors of influence and authority and thus develop nerves of steel?”

Jon gulped, but he remained unshaken. “Are you not referring to yourself? You seem very committed in me joining you in your bed.”
“Trust me, if I wanted to, I would have wrapped my finger around you already, but I knew that you would never join me if I forced you. However, I am stating the facts and you need me if you and your family and friends to survive. Personally, I don’t care about Daenerys Targaryen because she is too far away. And everything is about timing. Had I tried to approach you earlier, my efforts would have failed,” Khiara kept looking in his eyes.

Everything in Jon’s mind was screaming at him to not do what she was asking him to do, but at the same time, he couldn’t ignore the truth in her words.

“Even if I do join you, it will not be intimate. You have something from me, and I get something from you,” Jon stated.

“Intimacy is useless, but what happens in the chambers is always used for advantage. There’s more to gain from our trysts than if we continue to be separate, and encounters happen all the time. If you want to be a king, that’s one of the simple facts that you have to understand.”

Jon exhaled. There was no walking away from Khiara either way he went, and he had to admit that he couldn’t take on the likes of those like the Prime Minister all by himself. Khiara knew how to fight him and she would keep his family safe, but the price was his body. And he thought about what Daenerys would say when they eventually meet.

If I do this, I cannot hide this from her.

Also, Jon had the good sense to realize that Khiara only made such offers and she would not make them again. Praying silently to the old gods and saying to himself, “Forgive me, Daenerys,” he nodded. “First, pour me a drink.”

Khiara chuckled before complying. “Now you understand.”

After the feast was over, with Gendry slightly drunk and sleepy, Jon was about to separate himself from Arya and Sam before she ran up to him. “What are you doing?”

“Something that will protect us all,” Jon told her, but she grabbed his arm.

“I know what you’re going to do. And I am begging you, don’t do it,” Arya pleaded.

“Arya, something is happening, and we need as many allies as we can get,” Jon responded.

“That’s all right,” Arya shook her head. “I don’t need many allies. We don’t.”

“My lady,” Sam walked up to them. “I am not going to claim that I have more wisdom than you because I don’t, but Jon would never do something unless it was really important. I don’t like what he is about to do either, but I know it’s necessary.”

“You say that as his friend?” Arya was getting more desperate.

“Arya, we are all meant for happiness and we all will end up where we should be,” Jon knelt down to her. “But for that to happen, we have to do things that we might not like to do, but it must be done. You trust me, right?”

Arya remembered her promise to trust Jon, but it still took her more than a few moments for her to accept it. Finally, she bobbed her head and Jon kissed her forehead. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Be safe, Jon,” Arya implored. Jon smiled at her while he clasped his arms with Sam’s. Ghost tried to go with him, but Arya held him back and whispered into his ear that he couldn’t come.

Turning back to Khiara’s palace, he made his way in through the screen doors. Candles lit the way
to what he assumed were her chambers, which were also lined with her servants.

Making his way to a circular frame, where Khiara and few more of her maids were waiting for him, he took a deep breath. “All right. Let’s get this over with.”

Khiara dismissed her servants, who then closed the screen doors behind him. She gestured him to follow deeper in her chambers, where she sat on her bed.

“The first time you bedded a woman, it was in a yurt, wasn’t it?” Khiara asked. Jon nodded. “I might not be a woman from the steppes, but I yearn for something different. Show to me how you made love to your Chogo lady.”

“If you wish,” Jon said.

Khiara stood back up. “Disrobe yourself, Prince Daeron.”

He set down Longclaw and Dark Sister against a chair first. As Jon undid his robes, exposing more of his body to her searching eyes, she did the same with hers, with each of theirs. Eventually, they were made bare for each other, not one of them saying a word as they discarded every article of their clothing.

Jon knew that had a well-defined form, which Khiara examined closely. But being half-Lengii, Khiara was a head taller than himself and he didn’t need to look down or up to see her bosom, which were quite round and large. She didn’t look too muscular, but she was very thin and curvy, and her skin was very pale. Her collarbones were also shown, as she got closer to him.

“It’s not too late. We don’t have to do this,” Jon tried to walk away, but Khiara wasn’t going to be denied.

“No,” she shook her head while grabbing his hands and pulling him softly to the bed. “And besides, this is not my first time, so you don’t have to worry about hurting me.”

Jon looked into her brown eyes, which were a lighter shade than Chanhee’s, and he leaned down slowly to her face. Taking in each other’s breaths, their lips finally touched, and their kiss became deeper.

Remembering what he learned, he put Khiara on her back while not breaking the kiss. Eventually, he moved down her neck and ran his tongue on her breasts. She moaned heavily and loudly as he did so.

“You're safe here with me,” she whispered. “No one will harm you.”

Jon looked into her eyes again as she ran her hands all over his back. They knew what this was, but there was a certain… magnetism that could be felt when they looked deeply in each other.

Feeling his member harden, he guided it into her entrance and thrusted it in. She gasped, feeling his manhood inside her grow, before he pushed at an increasingly fast tempo. She moaned and exhaled as he showed what he did to Chanhee to her.

“You are shorter than me, but your strength makes up for it,” she breathed. “Push harder, Daeron.”

Jon complied, straining his muscles and causing him to lose his breath. Finally, he and Khiara felt the climax come, with Jon falling to her side.

“And you’ve just shown me how a dragon loves its mate,” Khiara smiled. “People who really love
each other don’t have secrets, and now we’ve seen each other’s.”

Jon sighed. “This is not love, Your Highness. This can be felt with anyone who joins you here.”

“I know. But can’t hurt to hope for that.”

Jon was left to brood, as he bedded a woman who he couldn’t love but felt something fond grow with her. But Khiara started to see her bedmate in a new light and promised to herself to protect him, for she did not want him to leave her side.

Daenerys wandered off into the plains of the east, but she didn’t know how far east she had come. She told Drogon to fly back to Meereen after barely escaping the Harpy uprising, but he kept flying east and over the Bone Mountains. She had never such high peaks in her life, and she never felt the joy of flying so high in the air like her ancestors of old.

Wherever she was, she was definitely nowhere near the Great Grass Sea, as the grass itself was different. And the climate contrasted sharply to the ones she was used to, as it was much colder here than in the lands of the Dothraki and in Meereen. She had to constantly rub her shoulders to keep warm. *Is that winter coming already?* she thought.

She ventured and looked for food, but the plains were much more desolate than she had anticipated.

Daenerys searched her mind as she tried to figure out where exactly she was, which was very difficult given that she had no reference points that were familiar to her. However, being east of the Bone Mountains meant that she was either in the northern areas of Yi-Ti or in the Plains of the Jogos Nhai, the latter being more likely because she couldn’t see any castles or even the paved roads.

“Come on,” she kicked some grass away in frustration. She could only think of what her supporters were going through as they tried to control the Harpy uprising, and she feared the results once the Volantene tigers came with their full strength. Also, her other two children were left at Meereen and she needed to go back. *They need their Queen, and the enemy ahead of them needs a strong leader to fight them.*

However, if there was one thing that she realized, it was that her dragon wouldn’t have gone this far without good reason. And if she was indeed in or near Yi-Ti, it could only mean that she was closer to Daeron Targaryen. The more she thought about him, the more she began to accept that her situation. She had longed to meet him in person, and she was nearer to him than before. *I so want to meet you, Daeron. I want to see how your feelings for me have grown,* she thought with happiness.

At that moment, she heard hooves in the distance. Turning around and trying to locate the source of the noise, she saw riders approaching her. Squinting her eyes, she saw that the mounts were zorses and that the riders were Jogos Nhai from their overly large heads. She remembered seeing the zorsemen in Vaes Dothrak, in Qarth, and in Meereen, but she didn’t really interact them.

Before they could circle her, Drogon flew down from the sky and roared at them. Their zorse mounts were immediately frightened, but Daenerys was confused that instead of fear, they were merely shocked at seeing a dragon. *What’s going on here?*

The riders looked at each other, speaking in their tongue that she couldn’t understand. One of them approached her and used his hands while gesturing with his head. From what she could gather, he
was telling her to follow him.

Intrigued, Daenerys got back on Drogon and flew above the group, who didn’t display fear as they guided her back to their camp. Landing in the middle of it, Daenerys saw that the entire camp was not looking at her with aversion, but they were merely curious at her. *It’s like they have seen a dragon and its rider before, but how?*

Inside what was presumed to be the chieftain’s tent, she was surprised that a woman awaited, and no man. From her pierced breasts and her ruby-studded cheeks, she surmised that this was one of the warrior maids of Hyrkoon. She was going to ask herself how did a Hyrkoon women become leader of a group of Jogos Nhai, but that would be questioning her abilities and would also extend to how she got control of a Dothraki khalasar.

The man that led to the camp and the Hyrkoon woman conversed to each other, with the female jhat eyeing her with great interest. She pointed at herself and said, “Sela.”

Daenerys figured out that the woman gave her name, so she did the same thing. “Daenerys Targaryen,” she answered.

Sela had someone bring her some paper, as she started drawing something. When she finished, Daenerys saw a great white wolf on it. Eyes widening, she looked back at Sela, who drew another picture. This one had a red dragon on it. “Meleys,” she whispered out.

Sela’s eyes also widened, as Daenerys named the red dragon correctly. She then gave her another drawing, which was a woman that she saw in a dream. “Chanhee.”

Sela quickly drew another drawing, and Daenerys could definitely recognize the beard, the face, the muscular form of the man of her dreams. “Daeron.”

Sela blinked rapidly as she told the man she talked with in a quick manner. She told Daenerys to follow her as they road southwards, and she rode above on Drogon’s back. They then came upon what Daenerys assumed was the Steel Road from her scant knowledge of the geography east of the Bone Mountains, and that would lead straight to Trader Town. However, Sela shook her head at Trader Town, which confused her. Sela instead told her to fly to a certain location due southeast, to a castle that she didn’t know of until the Hyrkoon spoke of it. However, considering that she knew what Daeron, Meleys, and Chanhee looked like and that Sela didn’t harm her, she decided to trust her word. But before Daenerys flew off, Sela handed her a scroll, which was written in whatever tongue of Yi-Ti. They smiled at each other as Daenerys nodded her thanks.

Flying for a few hours, she came across a white castle in the middle of a grasslands, which was right where Sela told her to go.

Landing outside of the castle, the guards and household were shuffling about in alarm. They then aimed their weapons at her, causing her to freeze. But the gates of the castle opened and out came a boy that still hadn’t seen fifteen years. He looked at Daenerys up and down before crossing his arm.

“Why do you have a dragon?” he asked in the common tongue with a heavy accent.

*Oh, good. Finally. “My name is Daenerys Targaryen. You seem to know something about dragons, it seems,” she said.*

“I knew a dragon and his companion once, also a Targaryen. But his name was Daeron,” the boy answered.
“Wait a moment. Daeron Targaryen was here?”

“For six moons,” the boy answered. “My father sheltered him, his uncle, and his friend.”

“And who is your father?” Daenerys asked.

“Joon Kitara, currently Master of the Horse for the Emperor and Governor of the Northwest Province. I am his son, Seong,” he stated.

“Nice to meet you,” she addressed.

“What do you want?”

“I’m here to find Daeron Targaryen, my nephew. I was told to come here by a Hyrkoon named Sela.”

Seong recognized that name. “How about you stay here for the moment? I’ll contact my father and try to get some advice on what to do with you. However, I have a feeling that things will get very complicated with you here.”

“Why is that?”

“I’ll let you know in the castle,” he eyed Drogon. “And don’t worry. This isn’t the first time we saw a dragon, so we know how to handle ourselves.”

“I would imagine.”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” Seong spoke in the common tongue with a heavy accent. “Welcome to Kushiro.”

As she was shown in by his mother Myung and his sisters, who eyed her with curiosity, all Daenerys could think of was thanking whoever allowed her to be with the same people who protected her family. It could only mean that she was one step closer to reuniting with her blood, and the one she grew to love. Just you wait, Daeron. I’m coming, she thought happily.

Chapter End Notes

This was my most ambitious chapter yet. With so many threads, but also bringing them closer to a resolution.

Arya is training, Benjen doesn't know the woman he's bedding is trying to kill him, Ardron meeting that dragon god and allowing him entry into his body (for what purpose?), our first Arianne POV and revelation that Doran is working with Varys to have Faegon kick Dany off, Robb taking his first step towards getting his own army, Jon bedding Khiara for political purposes, and now, Dany in Yi-Ti and a step closer to meeting Jon (I didn't actually plan that, but after reviewing how she was wasted in S6, I decided that it would be a better use of her character and they could get the Dothraki horde later).

As for Arianne, Adria Arjona would be a good fit IMO.

Hope you enjoyed.
Hi, all. Hope you are still safe and healthy.

I'm going to be revising my update schedule that will accommodate the other stuff going on in my life. But don't worry. You will still get regular updates on the story.

This is going to be quick the shocker, so be ready.

Harrold Hardyng looked down at Sansa coldly, her name being Alayne Stone at the moment, after she offered him to take him to the Falcon Tower upon his arrival. "Why should it please me to be escorted anywhere by Littlefinger's bastard girl?"

Those that had arrived before him winced at how unwise his words were. "You are a guest here, Harry," Lady Anya Waynwood scolded him in a frosty voice. "See that you remember that."

Sansa could feel the blood rushing to her face after facing such rejection, but she kept her cool. "As you wish, Lord Harrold. And now if you will excuse me, Littlefinger's bastard girl must find her lord father and let him know that you have arrived, so we can begin the tourney on the morrow."

*Harry the Heir? More like Harry the Ass, for he knows no manners.*

Sansa watched the dance unfold before her during the feast prior to the tourney. Earlier, she suggested to Lord Baelish that an order of bodyguards be formed for her cousin Robert, who was put at ease whenever he heard tales of his ancestor the Winged Knight, with the order to be named the Brotherhood of Winged Knights. Baelish supported the idea, as it would please "Sweetrobin" and also shore up his shaky position as the Lord Protector of the Vale by demonstrating to all who was really responsible for “safeguarding” House Arryn. The Brotherhood of Winged Knights would have eight members, one more than the Kingsguard of Joffrey, and they would protect the Lord of the Vale for a period of three years.

The tourney for the Brotherhood attracted many across the Vale, for there were many landed knights and lordlings who all sought to prove their prowess in a great test of manhood. But Sansa suspected that the more important reason that the tourney got the attention it received was because many in the Vale were very afraid of the ongoing conflicts throughout Westeros and sought an escape. The North was in chaos ever since the wildlings breached the Wall, with Last Hearth being taken quickly and Karhold to follow soon afterward. The stormlands was a bloodbath, as Stannis Baratheon dug in at Storm’s End and had used every advantage he had to maximum effect, although that would change once the Dornish came in force.

Distraction from the war and influencing the fortune of many members of distinguished Vale houses would both serve to Lord Baelish’s advantage, as no one would be in a position to seriously challenge his hold on the Vale with all of the festivities going on.

Another thing that Sansa had long expected for him to do was to arrange a betrothal between herself and Harrold Hardyng, and even she knew that the advantages of such a union between them were plentiful. Should her cousin die without an heir, Harrold would become the new Lord of the
Eyrie. However, given how he just addressed her and the hypocrisy he displayed by siring illegitimate children, she wondered if he was a worthy candidate for her hand and the lord paramountcy. I don’t need another Joffrey in my life, she told herself.

Still in her disguise as Alayne Stone, she showed the Waynwood ladies a subdued glare, as they blurted out awkward apologies for Harrold Hardyng. When they were done, she turned around and walked away. She then ran into Ser Lothor Brune, captain of the guards for Lord Baelish and by extension the Eyrie, who had heard what Harrold Hardyng called her.

"Harry the Heir? Harry the Ass, I would say. No matter his Arryn blood, he is just some pretentious squire," Ser Lothor scoffed.

Sansa smiled back in gratitude. "Thank you, Ser Lothor. Have you seen my father?"

"Down in the vaults," Ser Lothor said. "He’s currently inspecting Lord Nestor's supplies with Lord Grafton and Lord Belmore."

The vaults were large and dark and filthy, causing Sansa to light a taper and clutch her skirt as she made the descent. Near the bottom, she heard Lord Grafton's booming voice, and followed. Eventually coming up Lord Baelish, Lord Grafton, and Lord Belmore. They were discussing the situation with Bronze Yohn, who was becoming bolder with his criticisms and challenges to Littlefinger’s leadership, and Lord Baelish was hatching a plan from which they would bleed Runestone dry.

"Let us hope this works," said Petyr as he caught sight of Sansa. "When their granaries are empty, they will need every scrap of that silver to buy food from us and we will control them. And now if you will excuse me, my lord, it would seem my daughter has need of me."

"Lady Alayne," Lord Grafton addressed her. "You look well this very morning."

"You are kind to say so, my lord," Sansa bowed her head. "Father, I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought you would want to know that the Waynwoods have arrived."

"And is Harrold Hardyng with them?"

Sansa fought the urge to roll her eyes. "He has come."

Lord Belmore chuckled in amusement. "I never thought Royce would let him come to compete. What’s gotten into him?"

"Lord Yohn is honorable, which is what might have prevented him from allowing Harrold to compete if he didn’t have a sharp mind. If he denied him the chance to prove himself, it would create a rift between them, so why not let him tilt? I, for one, am not confident that he has a chance to make it onto the order," Lord Baelish said with confidence.

"I suppose you’re right," Lord Belmore shrugged. Lord Grafton kissed Sansa on the hand, and the two lords went off, leaving her alone with her supposed lord father.

"Come on," Petyr gestured her. "Walk with me." He took her by the arm and led her deeper into the vaults, past an empty dungeon. "And how was your first meeting with Harry the Heir?"

"Didn’t realize that he was hypocritical, considering that he insulted me for my bastard status," Sansa groaned.

"The world is full of hypocrisy, sweet Sansa. By now you should understand that. You've seen
"I have," she confirmed. "But to call me your bastard, in front of everyone else? I would have thought that he would have how to speak more properly."

"As far as he knows, that’s who you are," Lord Baelish reminded her. "This betrothal was never his idea, and Bronze Yohn no doubt has warned him of my special skills. You are my daughter. He does not trust you, and he believes that you're beneath him in terms of station."

"That’s rich, coming from him. He might have Arryn blood, but he has no distinctive traits or pedigree by himself," Sansa noted.

Littlefinger put his arm around her. "That he is, but he is your cousin’s heir as well. The Hardyng man’s presence here is the first step towards securing your place here, and the next step is to keep our hold on him. I can’t do that, but you can. Like all men, a pretty face is his weakness and you inherited your mother’s beauty. Wrap your finger around him."

After arriving at the Eyrie, Littlefinger revealed to her that the wildling invasion of the North represented the best opportunity that they had. The Boltons were charged the defense of the North, but with the majority of the northern houses either resisting them or staying neutral, their position was never more precarious. The wildlings seizing castles in the lands immediately next to the Gift would definitely call their conduct into question and the northern houses would seek new ones to lead them, but they needed to wait for the right time.

“So, you want me to be like your whores?” she asked pointedly.

"Oh, no, no,” Littlefinger shook his head. “A whore sells her body out for money, and you’re above that. Tonight, you will be the most beautiful woman in the hall, as lovely as your lady mother at your age. I cannot seat you on the dais, but you’ll have a place of honor near my own. The fire shall be shining in your hair, so everyone will see how fair your face is. But do take care to push away the squires. A whore brings green boys into her embrace, but you will not take anyone near you, at least those who are not worthy of your attention."

"Who would ask to wear a bastard's favor?" Sansa knew that it was all a façade and the temptation to reveal her identity was strong, but she disciplined herself and controlled her urges.

"Harrold will try to approach you, but you must choose some other lord and show him your favor instead. Never show yourself as too willing."

Sansa sighed, as she wished that she learned the courtly mannerisms Lord Baelish was talking about earlier and that might have made things easier for her. Littlefinger ignored her growing exhaustion.

"Lady Waynwood will insist Harrold to dance with you, and that is when you strike. Give him your warmest smile, let him feel your soft touch as you speak to each other. Jest with him and engage him. If he responds well to them all, have him take you outside for a breath of air. No true knight could refuse such a request from a fair maiden," Littlefinger recommended.

"You really think that he will go that far for a bastard?" Sansa asked.

"You’re a beautiful bastard girl, and the Lord Protector's daughter," Petyr drew her close and kissed her on both cheeks. "The night belongs to you, sweetling. Please always keep that in mind.”

"As you wish, my lord," Sansa answered.
The feast turned out to be one of the few good occasions that Sansa was in ever since her father died and she was so utterly humiliated by Joffrey. Besides all of the dishes, Lord Nestor's cooks prepared a splendid subtlety, a lemon cake in the shape of the Giant's Lance, twelve feet tall and adorned with an Eyrie made of sugar. "All for me," Sansa thought as they wheeled it out, as she had a weakness for lemon cakes. The cake had required every lemon in the Vale, but Littlefinger had promised that he would send to Dorne for more. Not that she cared much at the moment.

There were splendid gifts also. Each of the competitors received a cloak of cloth-of-silver and a lapis brooch in the shape of a pair of falcon's wings. Fine steel daggers were given to the brothers, fathers, and friends who had come to watch them tilt. For their mothers, sisters, and fair ladies, there were bolts of silk and Myrish lace. "Lord Nestor Royce has an open hand," Sansa heard a knight declare.

"An open hand and a little finger," Lady Waynwood sneered, with a stare aimed at Lord Baelish. That knight quickly took her meaning, as he also supported the cause of Yohn Royce in challenging Littlefinger.

When the last course had been served and cleared, the tables were lifted from their trestles to clear the floor for dancing and singers and musicians were brought in.

Lord Coldwater approached Sansa and offered his hand while the songs were starting. "Would you honor me with this dance, my lady?"

"You are very kind, my lord," she answered with a smile as he led her to the floor. He was her first partner of the evening, but far from the last. Just as Littlefinger had predicted, the young knights and squires tried to get their turn with her, vying for her favor. Among them was a Tollett and three other knights before she danced with Ser Albar Royce, Lord Nestor's heir. She danced with all three Sunderlands, all of whom were nimble with their fingers, but they were very stiff in their legs. Another knight, whose name escaped her, was quite disgustingly suggestive in his words, and yet another proved to be the epitome of courtesy. Then came more Waynwoods and whatnot. Finally, Harrold Hardyng approached her.

"Lady Alayne. May I partner you in this dance?"

She mockingly considered him for a moment. "No. I don't think so."

His cheeks grew red. "I was inexcusably rude to you when you welcomed me to the Gates. You must forgive me."

"Must?" She narrowed her eyes and took a sip of wine while making him wait. "How can you forgive someone who is inexcusably discourteous? Will you explain that to me, Ser Harrold?"

He gulped, but he made one more attempt. "Please, my lady. One dance. That's all I ask."

Remembering Littlefinger's advice, she sighed before nodding her head. "As you wish."

He smiled, offered his arm, and led her out onto the floor. As they waited for the music to resume, Sansa glanced at the dais, where her cousin sat staring at them. He eyed Harrold Hardyng with suspicion, as even he understood what his intentions were, but she didn’t want him to have another bout of sickness, for that will complicate things for all in attendance. Please, don’t be sick on me again, cousin.

Then the musicians took up a song, and she was dancing. As they moving in tandem with each other, she searched her mind on what she should say to him. She quickly decided not to comment
on his dancing, as he probably heard that many times that night and Littlefinger told her to not seem desperate. Then, she decided to broach the subject of his children, “I must offer my congratulations. It’s not every day one becomes a father.”

Harrold hesitated, but he smiled good-naturedly. "Thank you, and it will be my second one. My daughter Alys is two years old."

*Your bastard daughter Alys*, Sansa thought. But instead of words that could be interpreted as an insult, she came up with, "It must be difficult to deal with a different mother for your child."

“Very much so, my lady,” Harrold spoke. “Cissy was a pretty girl when I bedded her, but childbirth has not been so kind on her body, so Lady Anya got her married to one of her personal men-at-arms. It’s different with Saffron, though.”

"Why is that?" Sansa inquired.

"Her father says she is more precious to him than golden dragons. He made his fortune by trading spices in Gulltown," Harrold answered. “So… she can’t just disappear from my life.”

"What will you name your new babe?" Sansa asked. "Cinnamon if she's a girl? Cloves if he's a boy?" His surprise almost made him stumble. "Forgive me. I thought you would understand my lady japes."

*Littlefinger will not take too kindly what I said to Harrold*, Sansa cursed herself.

"Oh, no. I didn’t take any offense. But Saffron is very beautiful. She’s tall and slim, with big brown eyes and hair as soft and golden as honey."

Sansa raised her head, her eyes curious. "Is she more beautiful than me?"

Harrold studied her face. “You are comely enough, I will you that. When Lady Anya first told me of the betrothal, I was afraid that you might look like your father.”

"Little pointy beard and all?" Sansa laughed, but she hid the hurt she felt at Harrold insulting her father.

As if seeing the error in his words, he tried to take it back. "I never meant--" he stammered.

"I hope you joust better than you talk," Sansa shushed him.

For a moment he looked shocked. But as the song was ending, he burst into a chuckle. "No one told me you were clever."

*He has good teeth, straight and white. And when he smiles, he has the nicest dimples*, she thought. She ran her fingers down his cheek. "Should we ever wed, you'll have to send Saffron back to her father. There can only be one source of spice in your life, and I am very hard to come by."

Harrold grinned. "I will hold you to that promise, my lady. Until that day, may I wear your favor in the tourney?"

Sansa shook her, feigning sadness. "You may not. It is promised to… another." She was not sure who as yet, but she knew she would find someone. “But next time, good ser.”

As soon as Sansa returned to her chambers, she fell down on the bed and exhaled heavily. The stress of the moment had weighed her down, but since Harrold Hardyng had taken a shine on her,
Littlefinger would probably praise her in the morning.

And she had to remind herself that what she was doing was necessary, as she needed the Vale when she would fight to take the North. She could say all she wanted about Littlefinger, but he knew how to seize opportunities and she was not going to miss her best chance at taking back her home. At the same time, she also wondered how Bronze Yohn would eventually fight Littlefinger and the timing was very important.

_Mother, father, if there is anything you can say to me, please do so. I really need help now,_ she prayed to the above as she slept to gain her energy for the tourney on the morrow.

Kaijin arrived at the recreation space for the emperor, his father. The Grand Secretary told him to wait, as he had to deal with the daily intake of petitioners and converse with his personal advisors, but after his business was done, he would be granted a few hours of the emperor’s private time.

Kaijin couldn’t say that he had a close relationship with the emperor, and he dared not refer to him as his father unless he explicitly told him he could do so. He was the illegitimate son of a tea server and had the emperor not acknowledge him as his son, he would have lived on the streets. However, despite being a prince, there was a ceiling that he couldn’t go through and he was way behind in the line to the phoenix throne. Not that it mattered much to him, but his half-brother Yujin made things more difficult since everyone believed that the children born from lower-ranked women would seek to supplant the children born of the empress and those of higher rank.

After being made a prince, Kaijin grew up in the imperial palace alongside Sumeng, Yujin, and Khiara. Sumeng was the youngest of them all, but he was above them in terms of rank because he was the son of the Lengii empress. Yujin especially didn’t take this well, as he hated to feel subordinate and thus try to fill the gap in his confidence by becoming a deadly fighter. But after Yujin nearly tried to cut his leg off during one of their training sessions, the emperor had them trained separately.

Sumeng, Khiara, and Yujin grew up with high ambitions, but Kaijin tried to steer clear of their machinations, because he knew very well that their plotting usually ended up with someone dying. Also, Kaijin was living a good life, as the privileges of a prince allowed him to move up the ranks faster than anyone else and he was always afforded a place in the emperor’s reach. Moreover, the emperor treated his mother well by finding her a good husband and granting her some land and an income, so he had no intention of acting against him.

He had experienced twenty-four namedays, obtained the rank of lieutenant general in the army and an admiral in the fleet, and was known to be one of the empire’s best combatants, but he was not political and refused to be involved in any of the officials’ schemes. _The emperor treated my mother well, so I must not give him any reason to think that I will become an opponent,_ he thought.

Kaijin sat on one of the benches in the emperor’s garden, which also acted as his recreation space, and was served tea by one of the maids. He glanced back at where the emperor was sitting, where he was in deep conversation with some of his advisors. Whatever they were discussing, it seemed serious and Kaijin turned around.

A few hours passed and the afternoon was close to turning into dusk before the Grand Secretary approached. “Your Highness, the emperor will see you now.”

Kaijin nodded and followed him to where the emperor sat. The Grand Secretary took his leave while the emperor gestured for him to sit down. Instead of a servant, he poured him a cup of tea with his own hand. “You honor me, Your Augustness,” he took it and drank.
“How are you doing, son?” the emperor asked in the gentlest voice that Kaijin had ever heard.

“I’ve been busy, Your Augustness,” he answered while setting the cup down.

“Ah, yes. You’re quite committed to your duties and you have made a good impression on the officers. It shows that you have applied yourself well,” the emperor gave him a small smile.

Kaijin cleared his throat as he tried to process his praise. “Thank you, Your Augustness.”

“I was thinking something today, something that I had not thought about for many years. I remembered when I first met your mother. She was from Trader Town, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, Your Augustness. She was born there, but she spent most of her childhood here in the capital,” Kaijin responded.

“That’s it,” the emperor nodded. “I was getting tea some companions of mine and here was this woman of small stature and with the sweetest face that I had seen in a while. Did she tell you how we met?”

“She said that you spilled your tea and she had to clean it up.”

“Ah, yes. But I recollected that I had purposely spilled it because I knew she would come back and I didn’t want her to leave my sight. I then had my father’s secretary find her a post here in the palace and I got to see her every day. I even discovered that her father was in debt and I paid it all while moving her family in a new house,” the emperor thought aloud.

All of this, Kaijin already knew. “And for that, she agreed to join you in your bed?”

“As a younger man, I had a way with the women in the palace and your mother couldn’t resist my charms. But the reason why she stood out among the many others that made love to me was that she asked me to go very slowly and to take my time. Other ladies wanted me to go faster and harder, but not her. I’m guessing that deep down, she wanted the both of us to savor the moment and it must’ve worked,” the emperor smiled at that memory.

Kaijin had some mixed feelings how the emperor seduced his mother, but he couldn’t condemn him either. “Thank you for remembering my mother, Your Augustness.”

“By the way, have you seen her recently?”

“I was able to, but I had to keep my visit short because she has her own family now,” Kaijin divulged.

“Hmmm,” the emperor bobbed his head. “I told her husband to treat her well, or he will hear it from me. Glad to know that she was able to find happiness.”

That, Kaijin couldn’t refute. His mother had married a good man, a magistrate in Jinqi, and bore him six children. But she had her own family to take care of, and the situation would’ve been more complicated if he tried to involve himself more in their lives. I love my mother, but there has to be a distance between us since she’s the wife of a magistrate and I’m a prince.

“You inherited your mother’s kindness, son, and her good sense. Both of them served you well, as the soldiers and officers had nothing but good things to say about your style of command. However, you must also be shrewd and have some higher purpose for your life, as every man should aim high,” the emperor told him.
“Your Augustness, you have been more than kind to me and my mother, and my climb up the ranks was only facilitated by your grace. I have no need to seek more,” Kaijin explained.

“That attitude must change, because I am going to need you in the upcoming moons,” the emperor stated.

“May I ask what Your Augustness means by that?” Kaijin was unsure of his meaning.

“I probably don’t have to tell you how precarious the line of succession to the throne is.”

“No, Your Augustness,” Kaijin shook his head.

“Then you understand that my son, your half-brother, is showing himself more incompetent as my heir.”

“Your Augustness, surely his faults don’t outweigh his strengths,” Kaijin defended him, even though he didn’t believe in the words he said.

“Loyalty, even though he’s done nothing to earn yours. That’s one of the things I always liked about you. However, you are my son and you are a prince, both of which makes you an asset and a target,” the emperor outlined for him.

“Which is why I have been aloof of all of the factions at court,” Kaijin said.

“And that approach will not work for long. I am sure you heard about what your sister is doing with Prince Daeron.”

Khiara sighed. His half-sister had flaunted her relationship with Daeron for all to see, but he had to admit that it was a masterful stroke on her part. Daeron could use Khiara’s networks, while Khiara could claim that she was one with the dragonrider.

“And I found out that the timing couldn’t have been better. I found out that the Prime Minister is having his connections in the Ministry of Justice and the southern armies to follow Khiara and her faction. Daeron Targaryen and his uncle have stirred up a hornet’s nest by investigating people connected to him, but he’s not stupid in thinking that he can take on the Shus by himself.”

Kaijin had no objection on Daeron and Lord Benjen trying to stop the corruption in the army, but they weren’t careful enough and it was no surprise that they were being targeted.

“But the most important thing that has happened recently was when I made an ultimatum to Sumeng, your brother.”

“What sort of ultimatum?” Kaijin asked.

“He must end his liaison with Captain Dao and produce an heir with his wife before the year is out. If he fails to do both, then I will remove Dao from his position and lock them both in his quarters until they sire a son.”

“What about Lord Dao?” Kaijin knew that he would not react well to the emperor mistreating his son, even though everyone knew that Captain Dao was seducing Sumeng on his orders.

“If he reacts in any way against my wishes, I will respond in kind. And that’s where you come in.”

“How, Your Augustness?”

“I want you to contact Lord Buko and try to develop a partnership with him. It’ll also come with a
promotion, Commandant of Firearms.”

Kaijin was very surprised. That position would effectively make him one of the most powerful figures in the army, as he had authority over all units that were armed with black powder weapons. “Your Augustness, I’m honored, but surely, there are more qualified men for that post.”

“And all of them are either in the Prime Minister’s pocket or associated with Lord Buko. I don’t know what they intend to do, but Lord Buko commands a lot of respect because he was very vocal about corruption and he’ll be useful. I don’t believe that the Prime Minister will stay still, but I don’t trust what my daughter intends to do. We must have a counterbalance and Lord Buko could be the key.”

Kaijin gulped, trying very hard to control his nervousness, but the emperor was trusting him, and he didn’t want to offend him. “I will do what is required of me, Your Augustness.”

“Good,” the emperor smiled gratefully. “And please, call me father.”

Kaijin looked at him with surprise, and he found it very difficult to call him that because he was taught to not see him that way. “Fa… father.”

“Say it again,” the emperor asked.

“Father,” Kaijin complied.

“Please, once more,” the emperor looked as if he was wanting to hear that for a long time.

“Father. Why do I feel so strange?”

The emperor stood up and pulled Kaijin into a hug, patting his back. “Thank you, my son. I am sorry that there had to be a distance between us.”

Kaijin slowly returned the hug, feeling for the first time the embrace of a father who did love him but couldn’t show his feelings out of necessity. For once, everything felt full for Kaijin, as he had to live without a father’s touch until now.

Rhaenys paced nervously around her chambers, trying to control herself as the day that Varys promised was finally coming. Even though the former master of whisperers for the stag usurpers was a slippery type, she was going to let all of her doubts disappear if she saw her brother again.

Will he recognize me? Will he look like our father? Will he be a strong man, like him? Will he be kind, like our mother? Her nervousness slowly transformed into excitement, as she thought of all kinds of things about her brother.

But she also wondered if he would hold any resentment towards her. Like she would with her aunt Daenerys and her supposed brother Daeron, Aegon would probably ask her, “Why didn’t you come to me when you had the chance? Why did you leave me alone?” And Rhaenys didn’t know if she was prepared to answer that, for there were many things outside of their control that kept them apart. But will he understand that?

She heard someone knock on the doors to her chambers. “Come in.” Entered Varys, who was still richly dressed but carried an air of confidence. “Yes?”

“They’re here, Your Grace. We should be ready for them.”
“Of course.” She straightened out her dress and followed Varys to the outside of their manse in Tollos. Turning to her left, she saw that a procession coming towards them, with banners fluttering above them. She could recognize the sun and spear of House Martell anywhere, the skulls and pike of the Golden Company could be seen, and then the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. *My brother is coming,* she felt joy flow through her.

It was rather small force that came, considering the number of ships that arrived, but Varys told her that they were representatives and that the main force would be deployed elsewhere. Today would be spent strategizing and putting together a viable plan to push for their claims to the Iron Throne.

The leaders of the procession, from how they carried themselves on horseback, dismounted and approached the pair. There were four of them and three bowed to Rhaenys. “Your Grace,” they addressed her with reverence. She could identify them as a Dornishman and Westerosi who spent too much time in Essos from how tan their skin became.

“Your Grace, may I present the men sent to help us?” Varys introduced them. “First, I give you Prince Quentyn of House Martell, eldest son of Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne.”

Rhaenys looked at her cousin up to down. Quentyn was short-legged and stocky, thickly built, with a plain face, brown hair, brown eyes, and stubble on his cheeks. She also saw that he had a high forehead, broad nose, and square jaw. *Fine looking man, but not one I would invite to bed.*

“It pleases me very much to meet you at last, cousin,” Quentyn spoke to her. “My father, your uncle, was more than relieved that you have survived.”

“I see.” *Pretentious also, in thinking that we’re close because of blood.* “But I am not your cousin. I am Princess Rhaenys of House Targaryen and you will address me as such.”

Quentyn gulped and nodded stiffly, not expecting his cousin to be so cold. Varys moved on.

“Here is Jon Connington, Lord of Griffin’s Roost in the Stormlands and Hand to the True King,” Varys introduced him.

Rhaenys took in the blue-haired old man, the years obviously having taken a toll on his health and exterior. And she heard about what Jon Connington did and how much he was devoted to her father.

“All must warn you, Your Grace. I have the greyscale, so please keep your distance.”

*He’s concerned,* Rhaenys thought with surprise. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Here is Harry Strickland, Captain-General of the Golden Company,” Varys pointed to the brown-haired man in golden armor.

“Good to make your acquaintance, Captain Strickland. Let’s hope you fight for the winning side,” Rhaenys made mention of how House Strickland lost their lands for supporting Daemon Blackfyre.

“Whatever the outcome, Your Grace, we will not break a contract,” Strickland answered tactfully.

Then, Rhaenys’ eyes came upon a young man who had his silver hair flowing down to his shoulders, purple eyes, well built, and dressed in brand new armor. Searching his cheekbones, his lips, his eyebrows, for a moment, she thought she saw a ghost. *Father’s ghost.*

“Your Grace, may I present Aegon the Sixth of His Name, rightful King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, son of
Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia Martell,” Varys introduced her.

Rhaenys approached her brother, trying to find the words to say to him. Her supposed brother was strangely nervous, but she hid her confusion.

“You must have a lot of questions, brother,” Rhaenys started.

“So do you,” her supposed brother answered.

Before the celebrations and feasting could commence on the reuniting of two long-lost siblings, Varys said that they had important business to discuss. Going into the same chambers where they talked with that Yi-Tish merchant, Varys and Rhaenys sat on one side while Quentyn, Jon Connington, Captain Strickland, and her supposed brother sat across them.

“First of all, thank you very much for taking the time to travel all the way out here, Prince Quentyn,” Varys addressed him.

“Not at all, Lord Varys. My father wants to see my cousins on the throne, and I am more than happy to play a part in history.”

Despite sharing the same blood, Rhaenys found that she was disliking her cousin more and more for his conceit.

“Now, I will summarize the situation as of right now. Daenerys Targaryen is missing, but Meereen is under siege by the slave masters and Yunkai and Astapor are close to falling. However, much of Daenerys’ people enjoy strong positions in Meereen and they will not be easy to dislodge,” Varys began.

“We know that, Lord Varys,” Jon Connington eyed the Lysene courtier. “But the question we must ask is: where is Daenerys Targaryen? Shouldn’t you get your little birds on that, like when House Targaryen was still on the throne?”

“My little birds could only go so far, and I can exert so much reach before I am in danger of overstretching it,” Varys responded.

“That’s not good, then,” Jon Connington grunted. “As long as Daenerys Targaryen lives, we have a pretender on the loose and she could very well challenge the true king of Westeros.”

“My lord,” her supposed brother turned to his Hand. “Please be careful. Her niece and nephew are listening.”

Jon Connington got his meaning and nodded. “My apologies. But surely, Daenerys will see the truth and bend the knee to someone who has more right to the Iron Throne than her.”

“That hasn’t stopped pretenders of the past, hasn’t it?” Varys eyed Strickland, who had to be constantly reminded of his family’s association with the Blackfyres.

“And what about this Daeron Targaryen? Where is he at?” Quentyn directed his question at Varys.

“He’s currently in Yi-Ti and therefore well beyond my personal reach.”

“Yi-Ti?” Strickland was surprised.

“But this Daeron Targaryen had made many enemies in Yi-Ti and I was able to strike a bargain with their prime minister through his intermediary,” Varys revealed.
“What kind of bargain, if I may ask?” Jon Connington became interested.

“There will be a group of fifty ships that will come from Yi-Ti through the Jade Gates. They’re simply merchant vessels, but we will spread rumors that they are carrying weapons for the slave masters and Daenerys’ forces will have to respond.”

“How could they respond if they are besieged?” Quentyn asked.

“It doesn’t matter what they do, so long as the land of a thousand cities believes that Daenerys Targaryen burned ships and their people without just cause and thus giving us more impetus to dethrone her,” Varys explained.

“How does this affect Daeron Targaryen?” Stickland inquired.

“Who would want to ally themselves with a man whose family burned their people?” Varys asked rhetorically. “And it’ll make his journey back to Westeros more difficult, since he’s spent a long time in Yi-Ti and much has changed in his home since then.”

“My, my. You are still the devious shit that I remember you as,” Jon Connington blurted out, causing Varys to smile at him.

“Now, besides the Golden Company, how many men and ships does the tiger contribute?” Varys asked.

“They have decided to send twenty thousand men, forty elephants, and one hundred warships plus untold numbers of sellswords,” Strickland outlined for Varys. “Combined with the Golden Company, you have a very strong force here, all ready to fight for the true king of Westeros.”

“Your Grace,” Varys turned to the supposed Aegon. “Are you confident in taking command of the armies and fleet against your aunt?”

“Would we have a chance? She has dragons,” he voiced his concerns.

“Without their rider and mother, Your Grace, the other two won’t have anyone to take orders from,” Varys answered. “And who knows? When the time is right, you might claim one.”

Aegon smiled, while Rhaenys was closely watching her supposed brother. She remembered all of her father’s mannerisms clearly, for that was how she could remember him, and Aegon wasn’t displaying any of them. His posture, how he moved his hands and arms, the way he turned his head, and how short his hair was. *What the fuck is going on here?*

“When do we move out?” Rhaenys asked.

“We can move out as soon as a moon, as that is how long it will take for the tiger’s troops and fleet to arrive here at Tollos,” Strickland proved himself the specialist in anything related to conflict. “Once we’ve assembled, we can being the attack on Meereen while assisting the capture of Yunkai and Astapor when possible.”

“Excellent,” Varys stood up. “We have a basic strategy down and we can discuss the particulars over the feast that I have prepared. Please, join us.”

While the feast was being set up, Rhaenys found her supposed brother leaning on the balcony of the manse, which overlooked the ports of Tollos. Although he didn’t present his father’s mannerisms, Rhaenys wasn’t going to make conclusions, for some part of her wanted him to be her brother.
“You know. This reminds me of when I was in the Red Keep. I was just nagging my mother, our mother, to give me a pet and I was imagining myself as our ancestors of old,” Rhaenys said to him. “Our mother couldn’t give me a dragon, but she got me a cat, a black one. And that cat was one of the things that comforted me, because our grandfather was so cruel, and I was old enough to see his madness.” She looked to her side and saw that Aegon was listening, but he didn’t recognize what she was talking about. “Do you remember the cat’s name, brother?”

“Sister, it’s been too long. How am I supposed to know?”

“You used to play with him, and she was the only animal that wouldn’t scratch you, but you’re right. You were too young at the time. However, a pet like that cannot just be forgotten, especially since it belonged to a princess. I just want to share a memory with you, because I want my family back,” Rhaenys’ voice was cracking.

Aegon sighed, somewhat understanding her situation. “A black cat… Cannibal?”

“Yeah, yeah. That was the name,” Rhaenys smiled at him.

Aegon grinned before gesturing her to follow him. “Come on, it’s time for the feast. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

As Aegon walked back into the hall, Rhaenys’ smile disappeared. *Any Targaryen would know that any creature that is black in color will always be named for Balerion the Black Dread. And he didn’t recognize my cat, even though I heard him say its name so many times.*

Rhaenys sat next to him as the festivities commenced, and memories about her brother started to return to her. Wanting to check something, she asked Aegon, “Can you look into my eyes, please?”

Aegon was confused, but he complied. She looked closely and just smiled back, “I just wanted to be reminded of our father’s eyes.” He seemed quite taken back before resuming his meal.

But Rhaenys now had the final piece of information she needed. Apart from the dragon dreams of a false dragon, Aegon not acting like their father at all, and him not remembering Balerion the cat, his eyes were what convinced her. She remembered that his eyes were dark shade of blue, almost purple. But that was it: almost purple, but not purple. And this one’s eyes were just too purple, even though the hair was right.

All of her hopes, all of her dreams of family, her thoughts of seeing her father in her supposed brother… all shattered. She held back the tears, for Varys would know instantly why she cried. And she avoided looking at him, for he would know why she would glare.

But in her heart, a rage, a hatred, an anger rose up within her. All bonds of trust were broken, and her first fixation was on revenge against the one who lied to her all this time.

*Wait, she told herself. You’re not ready. When the time is right, kill him,* she promised herself.

Khiara rode Daeron as they engaged in another bout of lovemaking, or what they tried to call it in order to disguise the true purpose behind their trysts. They made a further arrangement to alternate each time, and she wanted to be in control since Daeron was on top of her the first time.

Daeron had just returned from whatever he was doing, which was either investigating the “disappeared brigades” or anything related to minutiae of army life and being a lieutenant in the imperial guard. However, she was already bare for him when he showed up at her quarters, with the purpose of that being to make him freeze and stumble from surprise. She then walked up to
him, undid his armor and his robes, and guided him to her bed, where she lied him down.

Remembering what her mother taught her, she squeezed his balls and his member, causing his breath to become sharper. She then guided it to her entrance as she sat on top of him, moving up and down while keeping his eyes on him. But wanting more, she grabbed his hands and placed them on her breasts, causing him to gulp at how plush they were.

Khiara was taller than Daeron, which made their tryst a little tricky. However, as the Prince of Dragonstone had to compensate for his shorter stature, he thus put in much effort in pleasing her and she felt more of the touch of his fingers and gliding of his palms. Most men tried to be in control no matter the cost and they only cared about pleasing themselves, but Daeron was different in that his concerns took second place. Any woman would be very fortunate to have him as a lover, but for now, he’s mine, Khiara thought as their encounter continued.

Eventually, their energies were spent, and they laid next to each other in the aftermath. “You really know how to please a woman, Prince Daeron,” she said to him.

“Even though I am aware of what this really is, I’m not going to make it unpleasant. Everyone deserves to feel gratified at some point,” he answered.

Selfless, Khiara thought with delight. All of her previous lovers were nothing like Daeron, which only made her want to keep him around for as long as possible. “For some reason, I don’t know which part came out: your dragon side or your wolf side.”

“Both are deadly creatures, and they will be damned before they don’t show themselves as committed and energetic,” Daeron turned to her.

Khiara nodded, while a smile grew. “Although now that I think about it, you were too quiet, just like your white direwolf. Perhaps the next time I call for you, be louder, like your dragon.”

Daeron sighed. “Not sure if I can put that much feeling, considering what we have.”

Khiara kissed his cheek and his forehead. “You’ll find a way. After all, who wants a lover who doesn’t make many sounds?”

Khiara and Daeron dressed each other and they walked out together, with her holding his hand in front of her servants and Jade Order members. Arya, who was assigned as her personal shadow that day, froze upon seeing that but made a great effort in hiding her feelings. However, what she was doing with Daeron was exactly part of the point.

Even though Arya was becoming deadlier as a fighter, Khiara will always have power over her because the Jade Order was meant to protect her, and she couldn’t touch Khiara without incurring their wrath. More importantly, she was communicating to Arya that her life along with Daeron and the others were in her hands. One wrong move on your part, and I will extinguish your light from the earth, she communicated to Arya through her eyes. Arya had the good sense to not respond, but she was now very cautious around her.

As Daeron had to resume his duties for the day, so they had to part company. And for some reason, she was getting more attached to him and felt something missing when he went away from her. But she quickly put those thoughts aside, as she also had important business to deal with.

Walking through the palace, many of the officials and much of the household were staring at her and averted their eyes when she looked at them. By now, her new relationship with Daeron had become common knowledge and there were definitely mixed feelings to that. Her supporters
among others praised her move, as she was able to get a dragonrider on their side. But for those aligned with the Prime Minister, she imagined that they were calling a whore and a lascivious wench among other terms for such a pursuit, but she knew better than anyone that they were definitely afraid for the same reason her supporters commended her.

Khiara calculated that her bedding Daeron, along with his and his uncle’s investigations, would very much force the Prime Minister’s hand and cause him to strike, as he couldn’t afford for her to get too strong and eventually overcome her brother Sumeng’s place. Even though she had the High First Admiral and the Minister of War on her side among other individuals and groups, there was still a balance of power and she didn’t have the strength yet to confidently fight the Prime Minister and his people. So, she approached the one man who could tip the scales in her favor besides Daeron.

Of course, she had to be discreet, for if the Prime Minister caught wind of her meeting, he would act quicker than she could respond, and she needed everything to be timed right. Too early and too late, and all of it will unravel.

Assuming the attire of a normal noblewoman and only taking Arya and another Jade Order lady, both of whom discarded their white robes for regular ones, she also covered her face with a veil and moved through the streets of Yin towards a district filled with perfume merchants. It was a common area where noblewomen congregated to purchase the latest perfumes, and it was the last area where anyone would suspect plotting. No one paid attention to the trio as they moved through the district and took in the many fragrances, which worked to Khiara’s advantage. For Arya, she had to shake her head and coughed, as these many perfumes were a bit much for her to handle. She never concerned herself with how a woman like her should smell, she observed.

Khiara arrived at the back entrance of a perfume merchant’s house, or so it appeared. In reality, this was her private quarters for when she wanted to spend a few days outside of the palace and observe the lives of those who were not in the halls of power. It was always useful to have somewhere she could go to outside of the palaces, a place that the Prime Minister’s creatures or any other with designs on the throne didn’t know about.

Entering her main quarters, she turned to Arya and the other Jade Order lady. “Stay outside and keep watch. It won’t take long.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” they answered. But with Arya, she was more hesitant.

“Have something to say, Lady Arya?” she crossed her arms.

“No,” she shook her head after thinking about it.

Khiara bid them leave. I’ll have to have a word with her, she thought.

Soon after she came, someone knocked on her door. “Come in,” she said. In came the man she had to make an ally of, someone very high ranked in the army and someone not in the Prime Minister’s hold. “Greetings, Lord Buko.”

The commander of the capital garrison had to dress in civilian attire, as his uniform in the perfume district would raise too many questions and attract unwanted attention. But the fact that he was here meant that he was interested in what she to say, which was a good start for her.

“Your Highness,” Lord Buko addressed her.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me. I hope that my warnings regarding the Prime Minister have
been helpful to you.”

“For that, I thank Your Highness, for I was able to better protect myself against his prying eyes. But I don’t think that you did that because you were concerned for me.”

“You thought right. I personally don’t care about you, but you have enough respect from many of the officers in the south that I can’t ignore you. It shows that your previous position as overseer of military examinations had served you well,” Khiara stated.

Lord Buko’s career might not have been filled with important posts, but he was in positions where he could identify those who could help him and shared his views. Being overseer of military examinations gave him access to an untapped source of influence, the next generation of military officers, and he would use his positions to advance those whose views most aligned with his own.

“With respect, Your Highness, you didn’t come here to praise my accomplishments as a general.”

“No, and I’m sure that you are aware of why I contacted you.”

“As you know, Your Highness, the Prime Minister represents everything wrong about this empire. Corruption has spread like a disease, officers are not committed in their duties, the very people responsible for running our country are shirking their obligations, and we have an heir who will bring ruin on us all, just like the troops he killed in the northern frontier.”

“I agree with you, Lord Buko,” Khiara nodded.

“However, that doesn’t mean that I will support you. You are much more able than your brother, but the empire is not ready for a woman on the throne. What’s more, you in power won’t necessarily lead to the radical changes that this empire needs, which includes the eradication of the civilian bureaucracy.”

Khiara certainly had an idea of where he stood politically, but this was the first time that she was hearing the details. “And what do you think would be a better replacement for the bureaucracy?”

“We have to wipe out the scholar-officials from governance and replace with them with generals, those who are committed to the safety of the empire, will not dip their hands in vices, and are loyal to the emperor. Discipline must come back to those who wield power, and those under them, and only then can the empire survive,” Lord Buko declared.

Khiara took a moment to collect her thoughts. “You might not support a woman on the throne, but an empire ruled by the generals is not something that will be accepted widely, as the people will never feel safe when those who are armed are also the ones who rule them.”

“The people can feel many things, but they are prone to inaction. They need a good kick in the ass to get them to do anything, and the army is the best instrument to accomplish that.”

Khiara was having second thoughts about working with Lord Buko, as his beliefs were very dangerous. However, she dealt with those who had divergent views before and thus hid her discomfort. “If we were to reach an agreement, would you support me against the Prime Minister? You might not have a good opinion on me, but you also cannot deny that Hudam Shu is poison to the empire.”

“What do you have in mind, Your Highness?”

“With the dual investigations of Daeron Targaryen and Benjen Stark, alongside my relationship with the dragon prince, the Prime Minister will be very threatened and sooner or later, he will act to
prevent me from growing stronger and having enough power to overcome him and replace my
brother. He might overthrow me or try to incriminate me, but those are just some of the things he
might do.”

“And what do you want me to do, Your Highness?”

“When the time comes, I would need your strength and your connections to act as a counterweight
against him. You might not be the most powerful man in the empire, but what you have can
determine who triumphs in the coming conflicts. In return, I will be willing to appoint you to a high
post where you can root out corruption and oversee a reshuffling of the army.” Lord Buko was
tempted, but he was slow to accept. “Sooner or later, the Prime Minister will come after you and
you have to decide if you’re going to fight alone or fight with me.”

Lord Buko rubbed his chin in thought. “Your offer is very enticing, but I do have one condition
before I accept.”

*Of course. “What would that be?”*

“I might command respect in the army, Your Highness, but there is one other person who has more
of that than I do. You know who I am talking about.”

“Lord Joon,” Khiara gathered.

“If you can get him to work with you, then I shall do so. You might have the fleet, but you must
have a large portion of the army to side with you also, and the northern armies are a very powerful
force. And Joon Kitara commands both respect and moral authority in the army and in court. Once
Lord Joon sides with you, the northern provinces and the northern generals will follow him.”

“And what guarantee do I have that you will keep your promise when Joon Kitara comes over to
my side?”

“If I don’t side where Lord Joon goes, then I would be acting contrary to what I believe in. What’s
more, if I act against Lord Joon, I will be eliminated and that’s an outcome that I wish to avoid.”

*Self-preservation and honor. Interesting combination, Khiara noted. “All right. Be ready to stand
by your words. I have a way to persuade many to join me and Lord Joon will see that he cannot be
neutral forever.”*

They clinked their teacups and Khiara left her private house with Arya and the other Jade Order
lady back to the palace. But on the way back, besides imagining Daeron’s hands in her intimate
places, she was thinking of what she could do to have Lord Joon join her. Unlike with the others,
she had to use a different strategy towards the field marshal, as he was incorruptible and had a
strong sense of morality. *There has to be something that could motivate him,* she pondered.

Daenerys drank from the teacup that Lady Myung, Seong Kitara’s mother, offered her. They
couldn’t speak to each other because they didn’t know which tongue to use and all they could do
was smile. Feeling the warmth fill her, she nodded in approval of the tea she drank.

Also joining their mother were Seong’s two sisters, Komo and Kirasa Kitara. *They’re pretty,* she
thought, and she wondered how Daeron interacted with them given his previous bond with the
woman Chanhee. She couldn’t blame him for seeking a woman’s touch, for she sought Daario’s
company when she was feeling lonely. But fortunately, Komo and Kirasa merely looked at her
inquisitively, meaning that nothing happened between them and Daeron.
Seong came back and sat down across her. “This is… unexpected,” he spoke in the common
tongue in that heavy Yi-Tish brogue. “Never thought the Queen of Meereen would show herself
her to our humble home.”

“You have a great home, Lord Seong. There’s a certain natural beauty here that is hard to find
anywhere else,” Daenerys replied.

“I’m glad you like this castle,” Seong poured himself tea. “My family have lived and died here for
over a thousand years and we were able to establish a base from which the rule the entire northwest
province. Provincial governorships are not hereditary like the lordships in Westeros, but the
emperor cannot hope to administrate the provinces without families who have the pull in those
areas. In this province, it’s my family.”

“I see,” Daenerys listened.

So, I didn’t just end up with a random lordly house. I am in the castle of
one of Yi-Ti’s most powerful families.

“How would you like to be addressed? As you are a ruler in your own right but not an empress, we
usually say, ‘Your Majesty.’”

Daenerys was at a loss for a moment, as she didn’t think that far ahead. “You are not my subject, so
‘Queen Daenerys’ should be sufficient. But if you must, you may use that title.”

“Very well… Your Majesty.” Seong wanted to keep some distance between them, as unlike with
Daeron, he didn’t know her and was very concerned about another dragonrider on their doorstep.
Daenerys knew that things would become very awkward, but they gave her shelter and thus, she
had no reason to push them.

“I must thank you for your hospitality, Lord Seong. You didn’t have to do it, so that says much
about your character,” Daenerys said to him.

“Your Majesty, please don’t be misunderstood. Besides being a queen, you are the aunt to Prince
Daeron and you have a very big dragon near my home. I’ve seen how dragons are connected to
their riders and one wrong move on my part would cause a lot of damage to us. The only reason
why Kushiro was not burned by Meleys was because my father treated Prince Daeron well, so I’m
just applying what I’ve learned,” Seong made no attempt in softening his words.

Daenerys had to appreciate his honesty and pragmatism. She had to interact with liars on a daily
basis and to speak with a boy like Seong Kitara was refreshing.

“I just got word from my father, who’s in Yin at the moment. You know where and what that is,
Your Majesty?”

“Yes,” Daenerys nodded. “Wait a minute. I just came here a few days ago. How did you get a
message and response so fast?”

“I’m not sure how familiar you are with our delivery system, but we have dedicated riders who are
able to deliver messages and packages over long distances in short time. They use new horses after
a certain distance and they ride day and night, which is only possible due to our roads,” Seong
explained.

_Yi-Ti is truly ahead of much of the world, if they can deliver so rapidly_, Daenerys marveled.

“But going back to the point, he told me that you are to remain here for the time being until he says
otherwise. He believes that another Targaryen in Yin would only make things more difficult for
Prince Daeron or himself,” Seong answered.

“Why?” Daenerys set her teacup down.

“You just got here, Your Majesty, so you don’t know how unstable the political situation in the empire is. Even if I had the time, you won’t understand every important part.”

“Try me,” Daenerys challenged.

Seong saw her determination, and thus told her about the factional conflict between the Prime Minister and Princess Khiara, the northern and southern armies, the army and the fleet, and a growing and dangerous force in the south among disaffected officers who had run out of patience with the corruption that had become widespread.

Daenerys ran her hand through her hair, as that was much to take in. “And I thought dealing with the affairs of Meereen was a difficult task.”

“And your nephew certainly didn’t help matters, Your Majesty, since he made a lot of enemies by investigating how they get their livelihood. I admire honor and honesty, which are two traits that I try to practice daily, but there is also a time to be shrewd and your nephew still hasn’t learned that.”

“So… your solution is for him to turn a blind eye on all of the corruption that has been going on in front of him?” Daenerys defended Daeron’s actions.

“You’re a queen, Your Majesty. You should understand that compromises must be reached if you are not confident about fighting your adversaries.”

How does this boy know so much about the world? If he’s like this, the Kitara family is in good hands, she thought.

“But I guess I have to thank Daeron on what he is doing, because his actions have stirred up the hornet’s nest in Yin and the conflict between the Prime Minister and Princess Khiara will come to a head sooner. Best have the clash come quickly than slowly,” Seong shrugged.

Well, Daeron had done one good thing at least, Daenerys thought approvingly.

“As tempting as it is to see Prince Daeron, as you two are the only ones left of House Targaryen, you cannot see him, not like this. That’s why my father told me to keep you here, for you will spend some time becoming familiar with our practices and customs.”

“Such as?”

“You won’t last long on the common tongue alone, so you need to have a rudimentary knowledge of the three tongues: guanhua, goryeomal, and nihongo. You need to learn how to behave like one of us, and you have to understand many cues that are unique to the empire.” Daenerys nodded, knowing that she had a lot of work to do and seeing the sense in Seong’s words. “Also, my father’s captain of the guards is coming to Kushiro and he has much to instruct you in. Please be prepared.”

“What do you mean?” Daenerys cocked her head at him.

“You’ll see when he comes.

A week later, while Daenerys was trying to learn how to write basic characters and her tutor was being strict by ripping it up whenever she got the stroke order wrong, she was called to the training quarters of Kushiro. There, she saw a bald and tan man showing his back to her while holding a
cane. As if he heard her entrance, he turned around but looked at nothing.

*He’s blind,* Daenerys noticed.

“You must have a lot of questions, Daenerys of House Targaryen,” the man said.

“Starting with your name.”

The man chuckled. “I am Hoon Ti, captain of the guards for Lord Joon Kitara. I have been sent here on his orders to toughen you up for what lies ahead.”

“What do you mean by that?” Suddenly, Hoon reached out with his left hand, walked forward, and ran his hand on her face. But she recoiled. “Why did you do that?”

Not answering, Hoon instead used his cane to swipe at her legs. Unprepared, she fell backwards and let out a cry of pain from hitting the wooden floor.

“Just like your nephew when I first met him. No roots,” Hoon scoffed. “It’s a wonder why you’re a queen.”

“You met Daeron?” Daenerys stood up.

“I trained him for six moons, and he had much to improve on when it came to the fighting arts. But combat is not restricted to the body and how your body moves is at the mercy of one’s mind.”

Before Daenerys could answer, Hoon clouted her stomach with his cane. Bending over from the sting, she fell to the ground face first after he struck her again, this time in the back.

“Why did you do that?” Daenerys struggled to say.

“Daeron was a boy when he first came to train with me, even though I didn’t have much of a choice. You, however, ruled over peoples and deal with governance. I would have expected a much stronger lady to be at the helm, but I guess queenship is no indication of strength,” Hoon scoffed.

Angered at his insult, Daenerys got up and tried to slap him. However, she didn’t know that blindness did nothing to dent Hoon’s skill in unarmed combat. He easily avoided it by moving his head back, used his left arm to grab onto her wrist, and twist it in a way that she never thought possible. Screaming, Daenerys felt him push her down and putting his left leg on her back, stretching her arm out of its socket even more. Having never been in this position before, fire shot through her arm and she struggled to control her pain.

“Ah, yes. The famed dragon temper. Effective in the short term, but useless after a while,” Hoon observed before letting go of her arm and pushing her to the floor with his leg. “Looks like we have much to cover.”

“You would treat a woman so roughly like this?” Daenerys asked as she rubbed her shoulder.

“Oh, you think that being a woman entitles you to courtesy? Is that it?” Hoon asked pointedly. “Well, you’re wrong.” He swung his cane and got her on the floor again, and quickly smacked her back before she could get up.

That was the routine for the next three moons, as Daenerys learned the three tongues and learned how to fight from Hoon Ti. She was able to get many information about her nephew from the man who trained him, such that he was a high-ranking member of the army and was proved very able in his duties. But there was one question that she couldn’t resist to ask.
“Does Daeron know that I am here?” she inquired while she was taking a break, her arms and legs feeling sore.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Why not?” She couldn’t believe it.

“Because it’s not the time for him to know. He has bigger things to worry about it and he’ll be distracted if he finds out that you are here.”

Angered that Hoon and Lord Seong were hiding the truth, she impulsively tried to walk out, ride Drogon, and fly to Yin all by herself. Before she got to the door, Hoon tripped her.

“You may not see him,” Hoon warned her. By instinct, she used what she knew about close combat from Hoon and tried to punch him, but he easily blocked it and slapped her face. “You are using techniques that I taught you, which I know front and back. You think you can force your way through me?”

Daenerys turned her hips and tried to force him to the floor by swiping his legs, but he felt that instantly and jumped. He then used his opening after he landed to grab Daenerys’ head and push her backwards. Now getting desperate, Daenerys used a combination of punches and kicks to strike him, but he avoided them all and then caught her right wrist. Twisting her arm and turning her around, he put a chokehold on her with his cane, and she struggled to get away.

“You might be a queen, but you are still a little girl,” Hoon mocked her. “It’s a wonder why you were able to get into a position of power, considering how weak you really are. Looks like you inherited the weakness from both of your parents.”

“How dare you talk about them, as if you know them,” Daenerys hissed.

“I was in Dorne during the Rebellion. I didn’t do any of the fighting, but I heard about what your father did. Your mother was a weak woman to have married him in the first place.”

With Hoon taking his insults one step too far, Daenerys reached her arms to claw at his face, trying in anguish to cause him pain. But he was blind and had grown tough through his trials, so none of her attempts worked. Pushing her with his cane, she collided with a pillar and fell down again. This time, she felt blood coming out of her nose.

“You don’t know the situation, so you can’t see Daeron yet. Only when we sense that the time is right will you see your nephew. Until then, you will stay here and do what we say. It doesn’t matter that you have a dragon,” Hoon told her.

Daenerys limped her way to Drogon, who was resting from flying around the castle and its immediate area. She rubbed his snout and felt his warm breath on her as she sat down, having little energy to move anymore for the day.

Are you all right, muña? He asked her.

I’ll be fine, child, she responded. She looked around the plains of Kushiro, taking in their beauty once more from how the winds made them look like waves on the ocean.

You want to go for a ride, muña? We’re not going anywhere, but you need it, Drogon sensed.

Smiling at her child, Daenerys mounted Drogon and said, “Sōvegon.” After taking to the sky, she was tempted to fly south and meet Daeron in person after all of this time. But considering Seong’s
hospitality and Hoon’s training her, Daenerys realized that both of them had nothing to gain from doing both, but they did it anyway. It showed to her that they were good men, the Kitara family were good people, and she would not be grateful if she ignored their advice.

And as rough as Hoon was, she had to admit that she was unprepared, and she needed to learn more things before she could see Daeron again. So, she would apply herself and learn all that she could so that she could see her nephew sooner.

Flying on Drogon’s back once more, she reached out to Daeron. *Just wait. I’m very close to you now and we will see each other. I will move mountains for that to happen, so expect to see me soon,* she thought.

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Jon ignored the stares he got from those who sat at the nearby desks. Ever since his relationship with Khiara had spread rapidly through the capital, the other officers either looked at him with fear, or viewed him with disgust. But both understood that with him in Khiara’s bed, he was now truly untouchable.

For Prince Sumeng, he became more distant once he heard the news. Despite him being a Lieutenant in the Imperial Guard, Sumeng had someone of lower rank accompany him while insisting his lover Captain Chenyin Dao to continue accompanying him. Jon could only shake his head, as it seemed that Sumeng’s words on taking care those who were close to him did not carry much weight after all. He could only guess that Sumeng didn’t like it that he was sleeping with his sister, who he saw as a challenge to his position, and whatever Chenyin Dao was feeding him in his ear turned him against Jon. *Doesn’t he know that he’s just proving himself as the weak man who just undermined his own position for the throne?* However, he wasn’t offended, and it just allowed him to have more free time in his day.

For the past three moons, Jon and Khiara engaged in their nightly trysts, which happened at least twice a week. He always kept Daenerys in his mind, reminding himself that what he was doing was necessary to keep his family and himself safe from the Prime Minister when the inevitable clash came.

At the same time… he couldn’t deny that Khiara knew how to make their time in bed enjoyable. She didn’t ask for much and just allowed him to do what he could, but she really put her previous experience to work in having him put in his all. Also, the fact that Khiara was taller than him really put things into perspective, as it told him that sometimes, size didn’t matter when it came such intimate moments, if he could call it that.

Soon, the benefits of their alliance were kicking in. Minister Zong had him posted to the Ministry of War as the overseer of topography in the Department of the Quartermaster-General, granting him even more power than before. Alongside the duties of his new position, which included looking over maps of troop movements, Minister Zong told him that he was granting him nearly unlimited authority to investigate the “disappeared brigades” and that he had to report directly to him. Jon eagerly accepted the appointment and began work at the War Ministry.

For Sam, he was given a chance to develop his own qualifications at the higher-level. He was moved from Kaijin’s household to become the secretary for the Privy Purse, which controlled incomes and all financial matters of the entire imperial family. He now had major authority, as no one could make the financial reports without his input.

Gendry was also affected by Jon’s alliance with Khiara. Although a newly minted lieutenant, he was given command of his own company and promoted to the rank of company captain. He also was assigned as the personal assistant to Major-General Po, who served under Lord Buko as
General of the Foot. As for his uncle Benjen, he was included in the next round for promotion to the rank of captain-general, which normally would not happen for five years for someone of his rank.

My, my. So having connections does matter, Jon realized that hard truth. However, he could hardly complain, for no one could interfere with him now.

One day, he came across an informant who said that he had information regarding “a huge transfer of goods of a nefarious nature.” When he asked who was involved exactly, that informant stated that a representative of Yuejo Chin, the merchant closest to the Prime Minister, and an associate of the gang leader “Wah” was involved. The informant didn’t know who Yuejo Chin sent in his stead, but he knew “Wah’s” associate’s name: Phuc Du, who went by the name of “Vinh.”

That’s an embarrassing name, Jon thought. No wonder why he goes by the name of Vinh. I would.

The informant agreed to meet him at a noodle stand near the docks, where he would give him more information. Jon reported this to Minister Zong, who expressed concern. “You trust the veracity of this informant?”

“I’ve heard the name ‘Wah’ several times now and if he’s doing business with Yuejo Chin, something big is happening,” Jon answered.

“How does this relate to the ‘disappeared brigades?’”

“Minister, it is known that many of the merchants have been appropriating and selling army supplies and equipment, save for weapons, on the market. ‘Nefarious nature’ could only have one definition. If we can make a connection between the criminal elements of this city and the Prime Minister, we’ll have legal grounds to bring him down.”

“You know, that’s not going to be enough to bring down a man like Hudam Shu.”

“No,” Jon admitted. “But just something to consider if we do decide to confront him openly.”

Minister Zong looked over his report before stamping it with his seal. “I’ll leave it in your hands. Do what you must.”

“Thank you, Minister,” Jon nodded before he set off on his meeting.

“But just one suggestion. I would not bring either your direwolf, your dragon, or your swords. They’ll be conspicuous in an area like the docks, so keep a low profile if you can.”

Following his advice, Jon changed into civilian attire, left Longclaw and Dark Sister at his palace, had Arya watch Ghost, and went off to the docks.

Without his entourage or his unique garments, people didn’t notice him and just went their way. For Jon, it reminded him of when he was ignored as the bastard of Winterfell and it was… refreshing for him to be ignored once again. I must be remember that I am but a small part of a larger scheme, he thought to himself.

Finding the noodle stand, Jon found the informant and sat next to him while ordering a bowl.

“Have you got it?” The informant gave him a slip of paper, which Jon unfolded. “What is this?”

“It’s a location on the docks, a warehouse to be exact,” the informant told him. “That’s where Wah and Yuejo Chin’s man are storing their goods there. I haven’t been inside because I am not high enough in their structure.”
“Could it be army supplies? Equipment?”

“Unlikely, since Vinh is involved,” the informant answered.

“Why is Vinh, or Phuc Du, important?”

“He’s the man that Wah calls on regarding opium production. But it doesn’t hurt to check for what you’re looking for.”

*Opium*... Jon knew that opium was an addictive substance on the market, which saw criminals receive high returns. *But why is Yuejo Chin involved in the opium smuggling business? Doesn’t he know that if he’s caught, he’ll be put to death, Prime Minister or not?*

“I need you to get a message to Minister Zong and Princess Khiara. Say my name and they will hear what you have to say.”

Still in his disguise, Jon went to the warehouse after eating his noodles and for some strange reason, no one was there. Keeping to the shadows, he found an unlocked door and went inside.

Inside the warehouse was a different story, as Jon found various men watching over many wooden boxes. Controlling his breathing and readying his sword, a katana, he moved quietly between the gaps and peaked inside one of the boxes. There were several white cloth sacks in there, and Jon was careful to pull one out quickly and silently. Untying it, he found the golden-brown crystals of opium, something that he was quick to loath. And he counted several boxes, which he estimated to be several tons in weight despite not being that good at numbers. *With this much opium, they’re not looking to dominate the market. They’re going to be the market.*

Jon ran through the implications of his discovery. If Yuejo Chin and Wah controlled the opium market, that put a huge amount of control in their hands, since opium was the most profitable illegal substance in the empire. And if they were in the docks, that meant they were going to ship it elsewhere. *And if they do, they will unleash chaos wherever it will go.*

“Hey!” Jon was alarmed as he turned around and saw someone peeking through the gap. “Who are you?”

Instinctively, he stabbed that person in the eye, forced his way through the gap, and tried to escape. However, the door was locked, and he found himself by the gang.

Someone tried to go at him with a club, but Jon easily cut him across the torso and killed him. Another tried to strike him with chains, but Jon avoided it and ran him through with his katana. More of them attacked Jon, and Jon was easily able to block them and kill them.

Trying to get an advantage, Jon climbed up the boxes and challenged them to come up and fight him. “Come on! Fight me!”

But none of them were that stupid to do that when he had the high ground. Then, he heard someone clapping, as the gang made way for a man of small stature but had an air of command around him.

The man had tan skin, hair tied backwards which resembled a horse’s tail, and wore black robes. But his brown eyes were something that Jon had seen before, in the most savage of animals. He was also counting beads in his hands, but he stopped to clap.

“Congratulations, white stranger. You have found my opium shipment,” the man smiled.

“Who are you?”
“I am the leader of the men before you, and the ones you killed.”

“You’re Wah?”

“Oh, good. You know who I am,” he jumped onto the boxes with a certain ease that made Jon rethink his position. “Then you must know what happens to those who try to interfere with my business.”

“Why would I be afraid of a common criminal?” Jon spat.

“I am a criminal, but I am far from common,” Wah climbed higher. “You here to steal from me? Is that it?”

“No,” Jon shook his head. “I’m going to make sure that all of you are executed for smuggling.”

“Oh, really?” Wah scoffed. “And what makes you think that you have the power to do that?”

Jon threw off his hood. “I am Daeron Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone and Lieutenant of the Imperial Guard. You are all dead men for what I’ve seen today.”

Wah chuckled. “Ah, we finally meet, Daeron Targaryen. I must say that your cousin has an outstanding debt to be paid.”

Jon blinked. “So, it’s you? You work for Prince Yujin?”

“I’m his partner, but even he understands that debts must be repaid. I guess if Arya Stark cannot pay hers, you’ll be enough. But the time for paying in coin has long past, so you must pay in blood,” Wah rolled up his sleeves, obviously preparing himself to fight him.

Jon took the initiative and jumped, trying to use the momentum to his advantage. However, his sword missed its mark, as Wah saw that coming. He used both of his hands to strike downwards and knocked his katana out of his hand. Now made to use his hands and feet, Jon threw a punch, but Wah parried it and jabbed him twice in the face and chest in quick succession. He fell over and collided with the ground, but he made himself stand back up despite the pain he felt.

Wah smiled as a predator before the strike, but Jon wasn’t going to give up. He spun around and tried to kick his face, but Wah leaned backwards just in time. Jon tried to kick again, but Wah kicked it hard and then kicked the other. Now on his knees, he tried to punch, but Wah twisted his arm, secured it, and struck repeatedly in his armpit. Grabbing his shoulder, he pushed him towards a box, stunning him.

Wah watched as Jon caught his breath and tried to stand up again, but his right arm had been dislocated and he only had one arm left. Jon charged at him and punched, and Wah easily avoided it. But Jon expected that and headbutted him. He then push-kicked his torso and causing him to fall backwards.

Just as quickly, Wah sprung back up using his arms and landing on his feet. Gritting his teeth, Wah was now very angry and charged at him. Jon blocked his punch and kneed in the stomach, allowing him to chop at his back.

But Wah grabbed his legs, unbalanced him, and threw him back on the ground. Not allowing his opponent to get back up, he pinned him there and struck at his jaw hinge, his throat, and then jaws.

By this point, Jon was really out of it and he couldn’t fight back with how much Wah struck him with. He watched as the gang surrounded him, shaking their heads at his apparent foolishness of
coming alone.

Meleys, girl. I need help, Jon reached out to his dragon.

They dragged him out of the warehouse, after which Wah stood over him. “You shouldn’t have put our nose in where it didn’t belong.” Jon couldn’t speak, for Wah had struck hard on his throat. “Let this be a lesson to you in the afterlife,” Wah grabbed Jon’s katana, raised it, and stabbed him in the heart. He groaned in pain, the blood coming out of his mouth and then the cavity over his pierced heart.

Jon fought hard to stay alive, but he felt the energy and the life flowing out of him. The memories flashed before his eyes: Winterfell, saying goodbye to Ned Stark, seeing his brothers for the last time, Benjen and Sam coming with him, the joy in seeing Arya alive, and then Daenerys. Oh, how he wished he finally met her after all this time and the regret of not admitting his true feelings, of finally saying that he loved her, was weighing down on him.

I’m sorry, Daenerys. Please forgive me. I wish you knew that I love you and thank you for showing me that I am not alone, were his final thoughts before he exhaled his last.

Wah smiled in satisfaction, but he heard wings flap and a dragon screeching. The gang looked up at the sky in fear, and saw a red dragon emerge. “DRAGON!” he yelled as they fled. But before he could run far enough, the red dragon unleashed fire on his warehouse and burned more of his gang.

Wah watched in anger as the source of his wealth was now going up in smoke, and millions of tael had slipped through his fingers. He looked at Jon’s still corpse once more before he had to flee.

Elsewhere, a few felt the connection break and cried out in pain for the loss. Kushiro would not have a peaceful night from Daenerys’ screams in agony, while Rhaenys felt something ripped from her heart and she fell to her knees.

Chapter End Notes

I took inspiration for Sansa's POV from the chapter released from The Winds of Winter, but I made Sansa more cynical and wiser because she has to be that in the still cruel world. And oh boy, she must be wary of Harrold and Littlefinger.

Kaijin is having a tender moment with his father, but will be be ready for the new responsibilities and what his father is asking him to do?

Rhaenys was very clever in how she was able to recognize that Faegon is not her real brother, but he still has the Valyrian traits, so the question she must ask is who is he really?

Khiara just made a deal with the devil (even she knows that), because a military government is not a very good solution for the corruption going on.

Daenerys is going through the same training that Jon did under Hoon Ti, but unlike the first time, Hoon Ti has no intention of going soft on her and she obviously will struggle. But worry not, Daenerys will learn how to fight by herself.

Now, for the most important moment: I believe that Jon dying is crucial to both here
and in canon, because there were so many things that were holding him back from
greatness while he was alive and death set him free (D&D wasted that plot potential
by having him regress). And I hoped you paid close attention to everything else
happening, for all of that has led to this moment.

The fight scene was inspired by various Jet Li movies, and Jon didn't have a chance
against a martial arts badass like him. But this time, Wah didn't understand the
consequences of what he just did and his opium going up in smoke will not be the end
of his problems. Things will start to unravel for those that stand against the dragons.

See you next time!
Arya walked out of the War Ministry, specifically from Minister Zong’s quarters, after demanding to know who was the last man that talked with Jon. Surprisingly, the minister was very cooperative and told her what she needed to know after Princess Khiara told him to assist her in any way he could. I didn’t know that she was even capable of caring about Jon.

Constables by the port saw the fire that burned down the warehouse and Meleys guarding over Jon, or what appeared to be his corpse. It didn’t take for the provosts to arrive, as Jon worked in the War Ministry and therefore was under the control of the army. After relentless interrogation of the many of the port workers, they all pointed to the gang leader “Wah” as the one responsible for Jon’s death, so a warrant was issued for his arrest. However, he had since gone into hiding and the Central Column had to be called in.

Arya and Sam cried over Jon’s corpse, as they were the only ones in the capital who had any close connections to Jon himself. His skin was pale, he was no longer breathing, his dead heart pierced by a sword, and his eyes closed as his soul had entered into the realm of the dead. She pounded his chest and begged him, “Please wake up, Jon. Please, wake up. We need you.”

Sam struggled to write the letter to Benjen, as he needed to be in the capital to look after Jon’s body. But Arya refused to bury her brother, as she didn’t want to think that this was the end for Jon.

Gendry arrived and patted her back in sympathy, while Sandor looked on and sighed. Arya cried into Gendry’s shoulder, bawling her eyes out as the pain of losing more of her family was more than she could bear. To his credit, Gendry said nothing as he returned the hug.

Then, Khiara arrived and looked at Jon’s body with sad eyes. Angered that she was here after everything that happened, Arya glared at the princess. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to pay my respects to Prince Daeron,” Khiara answered. But Arya lunged forward and pushed her against the wall. Her hands could only reach up to her chest, and Khiara didn’t resist.

“You dare show yourself here? You didn’t care about Jon,” Arya said through gritted teeth.

“I did enjoy a connection with Prince Daeron and therefore, I have a right to be here. I’m not blood, but it would be unbecoming of me to ignore the departed Prince of Dragonstone,” Khiara said softly.

But Arya was not buying it. “No. You are just worried that the dragon and direwolf are loose and you want to see if there is some way you can get some control over the situation.”
“Everyone seen what that dragon could do,” Khiara put Arya’s hands off of her. “I’m not here to control anything. I want to know how I can salvage this.”

“You cannot salvage something when a man died,” Sam told her straight. “There are things that you have no power over, Your Highness.”

“But perhaps, we can take revenge on those who had a hand in Jon’s death,” Khiara offered.

Arya crooked her head at Khiara. “What are you talking about?”

“That man they’re looking for, Wah. He is connected to very powerful people in the empire and we need to find him before the others do.”

“Who is connected to?”

“Come with me,” Arya followed her outside. “It’s undeniable that Daeron made some very potent enemies with his investigations and it is within reason that he died because of that. If he had managed to get to the bottom of the truth, many officials would be endangered.”

“You mean those with the Prime Minister?” Arya instantly knew where this was going.

“I know that Wah is connected to Yuejo Chin, who in turn is connected to Hudam Shu,” Khiara answered. “I just need proof before I can move on him. So, let’s make a deal.”

Arya crossed her arm. “Which would be?”

“You help me find the proof to take down the Prime Minister and everyone connected to Daeron’s death. And I, in turn, will give what you need to do to do what you must.”

“That’s not enough.”

“I wasn’t finished,” Khiara said. “You’ve been training hard under the former shinobi. It’s time that you put all of that to the test.”

Arya scoffed. “You want me to be your personal killer? Is that it?”

“You still don’t know the ways of the world,” Khiara sighed in disappointment. “But for once, your desire to avenge your brother aligns with my need to see my enemies destroyed. You do not like me, but I personally don’t care about your feelings. What would you choose at this moment: working with me, or not because of your emotions?”

Arya tightened her jaw at Khiara’s reasonings, but she had no quarrel with the princess at the moment. “Where do you suggest I start?” she decided to prioritize her need to avenge her brother over her dislike of the princess.

“Maybe start with the last person that talked with Daeron, then work your way from there. You will have full access to my resources, so use them well.”

Arya learned that the informant met Jon at a noodle house near the port, so that’s where she was. Studying the hand-drawn picture, she looked through each of the patrons before finding the one that closely matched the description. She stood by and waited near the table, all the while the informant was getting very nervous at a white girl staring at him.

After Arya passed by him one more time before making her approach, the informant stood up and ran. She instinctively followed him, surprising many of the customers. He had grabbed a wine
ceramic casing and tried to throw it at her, who narrowly missed. “Hey!” she shouted as they continued running down the streets.

The informant pushed past many of the people in the docks, while Arya was struggling to catch up. It was in the dead of night, but life in the capital was as vibrant as ever. Many were confused as to why a grown man was running away from a white girl, but they minded their business.

As they turned a corner in the street and towards an alley, Arya tried to reason with him. “I’m not after you. I just want to talk!”

The alley turned out to be a dead end, and the informant was trapped. However, they ran for quite some time and they stopped to catch their breath. But the informant tried to use this opportunity to run past her, and Arya acted quickly. She charged, jumped, and kicked in the chest, forcing him to go backwards. Getting back up, she forced him onto the ground, twisted his arm, and put his neck in a chokehold.

“You stupid idiot! I just wanted to talk,” Arya was tired, but she got who she came for.

Arya later found a roof and tied the informant near the ledge, with only one push away from falling to his death.

“I swear on my dead mother, I don’t know anything!” the informant begged.

Arya didn’t buy it. “Don’t bullshit me! I want to know why you led my brother to that warehouse!”

“Please. I was just doing what was expected of me. Please let me go.”

But Arya tapped his back, inching him further to the edge. “You’re not leaving until I get what I want.”

“I don’t know, you cunt!” the informant shouted.

Sighing and greatly annoyed, Arya rubbed her face. “All right, you can go.”

“Thank you,” the informant was grateful.

But Arya pushed him more to the edge. “You can go, onto your next life.”

The informant was trying very hard to resist. “Please, please. Not there!”

“I’m letting you go. What’s wrong?” Arya gave him a stronger push.

“Please, please. Don’t kill me.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, okay. I’ll fucking tell you,” the informant finally relented.

Arya slapped the back of his head. “Don’t you use those words with me, you fucking shithead! Talk!”

The informant exhaled to calm himself. “I gave information to Prince Daeron about the warehouse, but not because I wanted to help him.”

“You didn’t want to help him?” Arya asked.
“Someone told me to sabotage Wah, because they want to take his place.”

“Who?”

The informant sighed incredulously, causing Arya to tap his back once more. “Please don’t push me. I’m scared! Fucking hells!”

“Talk properly from the beginning, you got it?!?” Arya commanded him. “Who?”

“It was Vinh, his opium man.”

That was a name Arya recognized. “Why does Vinh want to sabotage Wah?”

“Vinh was a constable in the vice department, and they seized any opium they could find. But instead of burning them, Vinh stole them and he now has a supply of pure opium that Wah doesn’t know about.”

“What’s the purpose of that?”

“By bankrupting Wah, Vinh could move in and take control of all of the gangs under his control. He has more powerful connections with the constables and Wah would be destroyed.”

“How much are we talking about?” The informant breathed out in fear, only for Arya to remind him again that she held his life in her hands.

“At least three million silver taels worth, all of them snatched from the lockup.”

_My gods…_ Arya was stunned. “Where is Vinh now?”

“He’s off in the jungle somewhere. I don’t know where is.”

Before Arya could let him go, she had one more question. “Did Vinh tell you to have Jon know where to find the warehouse because he knew that Wah would kill him?” The informant looked at her with hesitation. “Answer me!”

“It was the only way to sabotage Wah, as he now messed up and got too much attention on himself.”

Arya’s fist tightened. “And how much did Vinh promise you?”

“One tael for every nine earned.”

Having no sympathy for the informant, to hear him admit that he had a part in Jon’s death was all she needed. Untying him, she kicked him in the back and down he fell towards the streets. Women screamed and men gasped at the corpse that fell from above, but Arya made her escape.

She now knew that besides Wah, she needed to find Vinh, for both were responsible for Jon’s death. However, she needed to work with Khiara to find them both, as there was only so much that she could do in this land. And in her mind, Khiara empowering Jon was part of why her brother was dead. _Once everyone else is dealt with, I’ll come after her._

As she made her way to Jon’s palace, one of the servants ran up to her. “My lady, we need help.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Yujin. He has just assaulted Lord Sam and his lady companion Lady Meiying Yoon.”
Not needing to hear more, Arya followed her. Immediately, she felt terrified at what Jon’s death led to. *With the dragon rider gone, every one of us is in danger. Oh, no!*

Immediately, upon entering one of the hallways, Arya saw Yujin kicking Sam while two of his guards were holding Meiying back.

“Your dragon boy is dead,” Yujin sneered at Sam while he remained on the ground. “You have no one to protect you from me.” He then turned to Meiying. “It’s been a while, my lady. I still haven’t forgotten that your father turned down my offer for your hand even though I am a prince, since he called him a ‘son of a lowly dancer.’”

“I will never marry you, even if you have all of the riches and power in the world,” Meiying spit at him.

“If that’s the way you want to go about it,” Yujin turned to his guards. “Hold her back. I’ll show her how a real prince expresses love to a lady.”

As soon as he started to unbuckle his pants and Meiying started to scream, Arya ran towards them and drew her blades. “Unhand her, you son of a bitch!”

Yujin groaned in annoyance. “You again. Step back, if you know what’s best for you.”

“You heard her,” Sam managed while spitting blood out of his mouth. “Get your hands off of her.”

“And what are you going to do to us, fat man?” one of the guards mocked him.

But Sam, determined to save his lady, bit hard on his leg, causing him to scream in pain. Seeing her opening, Arya ran towards and ran through the guard with her sword while Yujin kicked her. As Yujin charged her, the other guard tried to help, only for Sam to grab his ankle and trip him. He then heaved himself on him and bit hard on his head.

Arya managed to hold her own against Yujin, as she parried many of his punches and kicks. But when she attempted to swipe at his legs, Yujin jumped kicked her hard in the face. Lying on her back, the prince walked over to her while unsheathing his sword.

“Stupid girl,” Yujin scoffed. “Say hello to your brother in the afterlife.” However, Ghost appeared before he could make the killing blow, growling at him in warning. Yujin merely groaned. “Great. The white pet. I wonder how well you’ll look as my coat.”

“Will an iron ball look good on you?” Gendry made himself known, as he aimed a tanegashima at his head.

“Ridiculous. A captain daring to shoot a prince?”

But Gendry proved he was serious by shooting at the wall near his head, causing wood pieces to hit his face while drawing a handheld one. “You want to try me more? Get off of Arya.”

Knowing that there was no way that he could do what he wanted without really getting hurt, he pulled up the guard that was still alive. “I’ll be seeing you all again!” he shouted as they ran away.

While Meiying tended to Sam, Gendry helped Arya back up, who was still dazed from the kick. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Arya smiled and kissed his cheek in thanks, causing Gendry to blush. She then turned to Ghost, scratching his head. “Thanks, boy.” She went towards Sam. “You all right?”
“All things considered,” Sam rubbed his head while Meiying wiped away the blood. “I didn’t know that he was trying to obtain your hand.”

“One of the few things that I appreciate my father for not doing,” she answered him. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

As they all limped back to the palace, Arya could only think of what they could do protect themselves. Jon, why did you have to leave us here all alone? Everyone wants to kill us now.

Benjen walked through the hallways of the War Ministry, angry and shaking with grief at the news of his nephew’s death. Everyone dipped their heads in respect to him, as he was now a captain-general and was due for another appointment under Minister Zong. But all of that meant nothing with his nephew a corpse.

Barging into Minister Zong’s quarters, where he also found Lord Joon with him, Benjen walked up to them. “You have something to say to me, Captain-General Benjen Stark?” Minister Zong asked rhetorically.

“My nephew was murdered. You expect me to walk calmly in here after my family was harmed?”

“Lord Stark, please sit down,” Lord Joon gestured to him.

“I don’t want to,” Benjen shook his head.

But Lord Joon stood up. “I am ordering you to sit down. I am sorry for Prince Daeron’s death, but the situation has become more complicated with that happening. I am here to discuss what options are available, so your input would be very valuable.”

Already, they’re busy, Benjen thought. Sitting down, he turned to Lord Joon. “You with Minister Zong?”

“No,” Lord Joon shook his head. “But for now, his interests and mine are the same. Prince Daeron might have shaken things up at court, but with him gone, there’s now a gap that cannot be filled. What’s more, many are nervous at the dragon that is now without a rider.”

Of course. “And what have you come up with?”

“After doing some investigation into the matter, this situation is much bigger than anyone has anticipated,” Minister Zong divulged, who then explained that Wah was connected to Yuejo Chin, the merchant contact for the Prime Minister.

“Well, let’s arrest him,” Benjen suggested.

“And provoke the Prime Minister?” Joon’s eyes widened. “If we try to move in on Yuejo Chin, the Prime Minister will not stand by idly. He’ll react with force and the merchants will bring terror upon the empire.”

“So we just sit by and do nothing?” Benjen was angered at that notion.

“No,” the minister answered. “It’s all about timing and we have this knowledge. Now, we have to wait until the right moment to strike.”

“And when would be this right moment?” Benjen was losing his patience.

“It is a known fact that Prince Yujin had connections with the underworld controlled by Wah,” the
minister explained. “We have to find some way to exploit this, or rather, the Princess will find a way.”

Benjen scoffed at the mention of Yujin. “I am so fucking tired of all this roundaboutness.”

“Lord Stark, mind your words,” Lord Joon scolded him. “And the world was never simple. You are just witnessing how the things that really affect the lives of millions are done. But I too am curious as to how the Princess will drag Prince Yujin into this.”

“The emperor and Prince Kaijin were very disheartened by Prince Daeron’s death. And the fact that Yujin was connected with the people who killed him, coupled with his strained relationship with the imperial family, should make things very complicated. If we could drag both Yujin and the Prime Minister into this, all our problems will be solved.”

Benjen rubbed his forehead at the minister’s stratagem, or rather the Princess’. Why, Jon? Why did you get involved with her?

“For the moment, Lord Stark, stand aside and wait for our commands. Your nephew will be avenged,” Minister Zong promised.

Frustrated at everything that happened and saddened by Jon’s death, he allowed himself to be bedded by Mingyu, who he brought with him to Yin. As they lay together and she rode him hard, Benjen could only pray to the heavens and beg Lyanna, Forgive me, sister. I failed you.

Although the burden was on Ned in the beginning, Benjen assumed it when he came with Jon to the east. And now… the last of his sister was gone and he wasn’t there to protect him. The old gods damn me! he cursed himself. He lost his mother, his father, his two brothers, and now both his sister and what was left of her. He truly was the last of the old brood of the direwolves.

The despair he felt couldn’t be drowned by how good the sex was with Mingyu, who could tell that he was distracted. After they were exhausted, Mingyu whispered in his ear, “What troubles you? I know you’re better at this.”

“It’s my nephew,” Mingyu was surprised. “He’s dead, and I couldn’t protect him.”

She wiped away the tears in his eyes. “I’m so sorry, and I don’t know what I have to say next will be better for you, but I understand your pain.”

“What would you know?” Benjen asked bitterly.

Mingyu put her head on his shoulder. “Years ago, I saw something that I shouldn’t have seen and I realized that if I had revealed what I witnessed to others, not only would I have died, but the ones I cared about would suffer too. So, I kept my mouth shut.”

Benjen was stunned that she opened up to him. “What happened?”

“One of my friends, who was like a sister to me, I told her what I saw. But then, someone tried to kill us both and I was able to escape. But my friend didn’t.”

Benjen was sympathetic to her past. “I’m so sorry, Mingyu.”

“It’s all right. And that’s when I realized that the truth would not be enough and truth by itself did not save my friend from death. Against powerful people, it’s useless.”

Benjen became very curious. “And who was this powerful person that you shouldn’t have seen.”
Mingyu laid her head back down and started to drift to sleep. “Someone who holds ultimate power in the empire.”

Benjen was frustrated that she gave such a cryptic answer before falling into sleep. But that by itself was frightening, as the woman who laid beside him was practically a fugitive, meaning that his situation had become even more difficult.

He could not sleep that night, not with everything that had happened. _Lyanna, if you are up there, please, tell me what to do. Why did this happen?_

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Daenerys moved on horseback with Seong Kitara at the front and Hoon Ti next to her. Behind them were twenty men from Kushiro’s personal guard and above them was Drogon, who Daenerys told to remain flying and not come down until she told him to.

_Is that wise?_ Drogon was skeptical of her choice.

_I don’t know what kind of countermeasures that they might have, but everything I’ve seen so far indicates that we’re in the middle of an advanced civilization, the likes of which were not seen since the Doom. There are too many unknown factors and therefore many risks. I’d rather not put you in harm’s way_, Daenerys answered.

_Understood. Should anything go wrong, I’ll fly down to you._

_I’ll count on that._

Daenerys felt as if her heart was ripped out when she sensed Daeron’s death. She screamed into the night and Seong and Hoon were at a loss on why she was doing so in the first place.


“How?” Seong asked.

“You wouldn’t understand, since I’ve seen him through the flames.”

Seong and Hoon glanced at each other, shocked about her words and worried about the implications of Daeron’s death.

“I’ll send a letter to my father to confirm what you just said. If your words are true, then we can decide what to do.”

A few days, Lord Joon responded and indeed said that Daeron was dead, stabbed in the heart by a leader in the criminal underworld. He learned from Arya Stark, Daeron’s adoptive sister, that he was lured into a trap and was merely as a tool in a power play among different gang leaders. However, all of the capital was in an uproar, as each faction blamed each other for killing the dragon rider. And fear was high, as no one knew what to do about Meleys as she simply rested atop the roof of his palace.

As for Daenerys, all she could think about was getting retribution for Daeron’s killers. _They took my heart out and they took away my one chance at being happy. I’m going to kill every last one who gained something from his death_, she swore to herself.

“I am going to fly south to the capital,” Daenerys then tried to walk to Drogon and mount him. But Seong and Hoon blocked her.
“I can’t allow you to do that,” Seong shook his head.

“Step aside. You don’t want to get in the way of the dragon,” Daenerys threatened.

“If you show up in the capital, they will try to kill you,” Hoon said.

Daenerys blinked. “What do you mean?”

Seong cleared his throat. “We got reports that fifty Yi-Tish merchanters were burned by your armies in the Slaver’s Bay, your troops acting on rumors that they were supplying weapons and that you sunk them without provocation.”

Daenerys gasped. “What?”

“Regardless of what actually happened, you will not be welcomed in court,” Hoon told her. “If you show up, they will arrest you.”

Hesitant for a moment, Daenerys shook off their concerns. “What can they do against a dragon? I will burn anyone who tries to put me in chains.”

“I know you can, but that will only make things worse,” Seong made clear. “Plus, Daeron has his own people in Yin and they will suffer for being associated with Targaryens. You will disregard their safety for your need for revenge?”

Daenerys had no answer to that. “Then what do you suggest? I’m not going to let whoever benefitted from Daeron’s death roam free.”

“And neither will we and my father,” Seong answered. “But let’s do this clandestinely. We’ll travel southwards using the roads, first to Asabhad and then to Yin. From there, we’ll meet up with my father and we’ll strategize.”

“Lord Joon knows his way around the court, so he’ll know what to do,” Hoon added. “Please, trust us.”

Daenerys looked at the young Kitara and her blind teacher, who already taught her much regarding the art of unarmed combat. They both treated her with decency, even though the latter was quite harsh. And given what she had heard about Lord Joon, this was someone that she really needed at the moment.

“When can we leave?”

“Give me a few days and the arrangements will be made,” Seong said.

The party ventured for the next few weeks southwards towards the main road that connected Qarth and Asabhad, with Daenerys realizing that this was the closest she had been in years to the city where the full power of her dragons was just being realized. *The place where I really felt hope again.*

But Asabhad was very different from Qarth, Meereen, Yunkai, and Pentos in many different areas. *Different, but not better.* The westernmost port city of the Golden Empire was truly a city of commerce, as she recognized many different types of accents and peoples from all over the world congregated in this one packed space. Traders from the Free Cities, Westeros, and the Bone Mountains. However, they had to be cautious if what happened in the Slaver’s Bay was true. So, Daenerys wore a hood over her hair and face.
They all arrived at a tavern Hoon was familiar with, where they would spend the night before moving onto the road that led to Yin. It was here that Dany got her first real taste of Yi-Tish food, a bowl of noodles and steamed meat buns. She was not familiar with the hashi, so Seong told her to just eat the buns. They were quite filling, with grounded beef and pork, and they warmed her insides.

“Forgive me asking this, Your Majesty,” Seong swallowed some noodles. “But what was it like to begin freeing the slaves?”

Daenerys was brought back to when she met Missandei and burned Yunkai while obtaining the Unsullied. “It was… I can’t really describe it, since the feeling you get from allowing many a chance to carve their own path through life is something that words will fall short of. But when I remember my own moments where I had no freedom, to see others have the freedom that I didn’t have brought me much satisfaction, since I could somehow see myself in the slaves that I freed.”

“But do be careful about letting your achievements cloud your judgement,” Hoon warned her. “Too many times has there be many rulers who achieved much and then got complacent because of the weight of their deeds. The greatest thing that you can have is someone or something to always challenge you, as they will continually make sure that you always strive for excellence. The only way that you truly have rest is when you’re dead, and until then, you have work to do.”

Daenerys just listened to what Hoon Ti said, since he saw more of the world than she did and was a blind man who survived countless times. If a blind man can be where he is, nothing is impossible.

They all retired for the night, with Daenerys falling asleep in the cramped room. But considering that they wouldn’t stay there for long, she didn’t mind.

As she fell asleep, her mind drifted to a place she had long imagined: the Red Keep. Targaryen banners were fluttering in the wind and everyone cheered as she moved through the streets of the city laid down by her ancestors. Upon entering the yard of the Red Keep, she saw Daeron waiting for her there. But Daeron looked slightly older, beard trimmed and hair loose, and around his head was the crown of Aegon the Conqueror. He was wielding Valyrian steel bastard sword with a white wolf’s head, which combined made him into the most handsome and deadliest man she had seen.

But next to Daeron was the Dornishwoman that she saw in her dreams, the one who said that she was of the blood of the dragon. She was wearing dragon-scaled armor that was tight around her slim frame, the simple gold band crown of Aegon the Third of His Name and Viserys the Second of His Name, and held a Dornish spear in her hand.

She looked at herself and saw that she was also armored, also with dragon scales, but her eyes widened as she saw Dark Sister tied to her waist, the legendary sword of Visenya Targaryen.

She didn’t know if this reflected her desires, but she couldn’t deny that Daeron and the Dornishwoman never looked more attractive than they did now.

“My love, our love, our queen,” Daeron said to her.

“Welcome home,” the Dornishwoman smiled at her.

“My love, my king,” Daenerys grinned at Daeron before looking at the Dornishwoman. “Are you Rhaenys? Is that who you are?”

“I thought you knew,” Rhaenys nodded.
“But I thought you were dead. How?” Daenerys asked the both of them.

“I am but a survivor thanks to someone who took my place,” Rhaenys answered.

“And I don’t know where I am now. It seems as if my soul is stuck in the middle,” Daeron told her.

But before she got more answers, she felt the dream collapsing. “Please come back, Daeron!”

She wakened, her breathing heavy, as the door knocked frantically. “Who is it?”

“Your Majesty, trouble!” Seong yelled through the door. “We’re surrounded.”

Daenerys jumped out of bed, opened the door, and found Hoon Ti and Seong peeking through the open windows. Also looking through, she saw hundreds of soldiers surrounding their tavern.

“This is Captain Chen of the Southwest Imperial Army!” someone shouted at them in the common tongue. “We have you surrounded, and we know that Daenerys Targaryen is in there. Surrender her and yourselves, and you will not be harmed.”

“From what I can count, that’s an entire battalion out there,” Seong was very scared. “How did they know were were here?”

“The tavern owner is gone,” Hoon noted. “He must’ve sold us out and informed the captain-general.”

“There’s no way that we could fight our way through this, unless your dragon comes and burns them.”

Daenerys shook her head. “Absolutely not! I might kill them all, but they’re too close to the other houses. Others will be harmed.”

“So what do you suggest we do?”

Daenerys should’ve known that going south to Daeron was never going to be easy, but she also knew that fighting her way through would only cause more problems and she didn’t need more of that. There was only one option she could take.

“Should we surrender?”

“What? Are you crazy?” Seong was aghast.

“It’s not as crazy as you think. If there is a justice system here, they’ll just chain me up and put me in prison. Since I am blamed for killing Yi-Tish merchants and considering my status as a queen, they’re not just going to try me in any trial. They’ll have to take me to the capital and thus close to whoever can help us.”

“She’s right. There’s no way out but fighting, and that will not end well for us,” Hoon agreed.

Seong was still not convinced. “I assure you, Lord Seong. My dragon will not let any of us die. Let’s use the system in place here to our advantage.”

Seong sighed but he nodded in agreement. He took out a white flag and said, “Stay behind me.” They all walked outside, where bows and sticks of metal and wood were aimed at them. “I am Seong Kitara, son of Lord Joon Kitara. I demand to be treated as befitting of someone from a lordly family.”
An older man, presumably Captain Chen, walked up to them with a few of his officers. “Is that Daenerys Targaryen behind you?” he asked in the common tongue.

“I am,” she affirmed.

Captain Chen gestured to his soldiers to put them all in chains. “What are you doing? I am the son of Lord Joon Kitara,” Seong struggled against the chains being put on his wrists while Hoon gave no resistance.

“Seong Kitara and Hoon Ti, you’re both under arrest for aiding and abetting an enemy of the empire. You will be taken to the capital to be tried for treason. Take them away!” The soldiers complied while Captain Chen walked nearer to Daenerys. “Greetings, Your Majesty. It is my most solemn duty to place you under arrest for murder and violating neutrality. Please don’t resist, for you will also be taken to the capital.”

“I won’t,” Daenerys promised as she was led away, surrounded by armed men.

*Will you be all right?* Drogon asked her.

*Yes, I will be. Trust me.* The prospect of going to the capital filled with nothing but pleasure, for she will take revenge on those that killed Daeron. *You will be avenged, and nothing in this world will stop me until everyone that killed you is dead.*

Sandor sat across his attending physician, who agreed to meet him at an open-air teahouse. This would be the last of her checkups, as she was largely satisfied with how he progressed from his addict phase and thus no longer needed to be treated like a patient.

But the hard thing about Sandor when it came to this woman was that she was digging into his mind. She told him, “Part of ensuring that you don’t fall back on old habits is to examine the root of the problem. Whether it be drink or yapian, many become involved in vices because they don’t know any other way to deal with whatever problem they have in their life. And addiction is merely a symptom of a much larger problem.”

Sandor was naturally hesitant about sharing his personal struggles with someone he barely knew, but little by little and due to her encouragement, he revealed all of the difficulties in his life.

After paying for their tea, which she said could be listed on her expense report to the palace, she went straight to it. “If you saw your brother again, would you kill him?”

Sandor sighed. “I would, yes. It’s because of that fuck that I got scarred in the first place.”

“All right. But the damage has been done to your face. What other purpose would killing your brother serve?”

Sandor swallowed. “I get my vengeance.”

“But what happens afterwards?”

Sandor didn’t think that far. “I… might live out my days just wandering about.”

“And won’t that be a waste then?” she asked. “You getting your revenge and having no purpose in your life?”

“I don’t know anything else but fighting and killing, so I don’t know how much more useful I can
be,” Sandor pointed out.

“But instead of killing for killing’s sake, have you ever thought about using your experience for a purpose larger than yourself?”

Sandor scoffed. “Lots of horrible shit in this world gets done for something larger than ourselves.”

“And you’re looking at it from only one side, which is understandable considering that you never experienced love from your own father.”

Sandor froze. “Don’t mention him.”

“There are truly good people in this world, and good things happen all the time,” she continued. “You just haven’t opened your eyes to the many other possibilities that can happen.”

Sandor exhaled heavily. “Before he died, Daeron Targaryen told me that I could find a place among the demon hunters in Mossovy far up north. He also told me that the Guardian of the Five Forts will pay me handsomely for every demon I kill.”

“Well, that’s a start,” she smiled. “The world would be the better with less monsters in it. Your killing skills would be put to great use killing actual demons, and the gods know how useful that can be.”

Sandor sipped his tea before the question he had to ask came to him. “May I write you?”

She was surprised. “Write me?”

“I’m no longer your patient and this won’t violate any ethics that you have. As I will be going north, I won’t be able to see you very often. I really enjoyed our conversations and I don’t wish for them to end.”

She thought about it, making Sandor feel nervous about a woman for the first time. *Brienne of fucking Tarth doesn’t count, since she kicked me off the edge.* “All right. Just send your letters to my building and I will reply as soon as I get them.” But Sandor was expecting her to say no, as he expected her to be repulsed. “Ah, not the kind of response you thought in your mind?”

Sandor was surprised. *She’s sharp.* “Yes.”

“I personally like how frank you were with me, and you never asked me any questions about myself. You’ve got a dark past and only those who experienced that can understand.”

Sandor blinked. “What do you mean you have a dark past?”

“Let’s just say that I don’t flaunt myself because if I do, someone might come after me,” she revealed.

Sandor had the good sense not to ask further, but he was glad nonetheless that she accepted his request. “I will see you again, right?”

“Of course,” she answered before they clinked their cups.

Later, Sandor was on the road again. But instead of running without a purpose, he was moving towards another chapter in his life.

Theon struggled to hide amongst the trees of the wolfswood, even though he spent much of his
youth hunting and travelling in the woods of House Stark. That was what they would always be to him, despite his treachery against the North and the change in ownership to House Bolton.

“Are you all right?” Jeyne Poole, alternately Arya Stark, asked with concern as he rested his hand on a tree bark and caught his breath.

“Just give me one moment,” Theon told her. His tribulations caused by the monster Ramsay had taken a toll on his physical health and he was not the same man that he was before. Gone was the one who could pride himself in pleasing many women in Winter Town’s brothel and who could boast about being a good archer. He was now a man who would forever carry the scars of a sadist and would now have to spend the rest of his life figuring out who he was beyond the son of Balon Greyjoy, the hostage of Winterfell, and the slave of Ramsay.

“Do you want me to change the bandage?” Jeyne offered.

“Please,” Theon knew that they needed to continue moving, but his head was feeling an itch and he needed to change the wrappings that wrapped around where his eye was.

After Myranda and Violet set themselves on Theon, Ramsay came in and took out his right eye, saying, “You’ve got eyes that can fool you. Let’s see how well you can be deceived without one of them.” Theon had to wear an eyepatch, which had greatly affected him since he imagined the women who he once tumbled with rejecting him for how disgusting he looked. To add more insult to the injury, he had to offer “Arya” to Ramsay and watched as he roughly bedded her.

However, fortune had come to both Theon and Jeyne, as northern houses such as the Mormonts, the Manderlys, the Reeds, the Flints of Widow’s Watch, the Hornwoods, the Cerwyns, and the northern mountain clans had either declared neutrality or actively resisted the Bolton rule, making their administration very difficult. It only got worse once the wildlings breached the Wall, with both Last Hearth and then Karhold falling to them. Roose Bolton had his own personal bannermen, the Umbers, the Karstarks, the Glovers, and the Dustins to rely on, but they were geographically surrounded and with the war against Stannis still raging, Tywin Lannister could not send an adequate army to march north. And even if he could, the crannogmen were strongly against the Boltons and history warned against those who tried to force their way through the Neck.

Tensions had never been higher inside Winterfell, as Roose Bolton and Ramsay openly quarreled with each other over who was to blame for their predicament, and Lords Umber and Karstark were very displeased at the apparent lack of willpower in both regarding efforts to retake their castles. Everyone was in fear of what might happen next, as their supposed Wardens were clearly not up to the task and many of the household were beginning to look at the days of Eddard and Catelyn Stark with melancholy.

With the tensions and the deteriorating situation, Theon decided that he couldn’t wait any longer. *Everyone could see that the ship is sinking, so I have to get off before I drown with it.* But even though he knew that Jeyne wasn’t Arya, he wasn’t about to leave Sansa’s friend to more suffering.

Finding his courage again, Theon asked one of the farriers to strike Ramsay in the face so that he and Jeyne could have an opening. The farrier believed that Jeyne was Arya and having grown to resent Ramsay’s abuses, he put aside his hatred for Theon and did what was asked of him. As the gate was still closed due to the threat from the outside, Theon and Jeyne had no choice but to jump from the battlements.

“Stay close to me. Don’t leave me,” Jeyne pleaded even though she was very scared at the thought of leaping from the wall into the snow below.
Thinking upon his betrayal of House Stark and how he failed them when they needed him, Theon could only say, “Always.”

Miraculously, they survived the jump, although both got a limp from how harder the snow was. While the farrier struck Ramsay and thus distracted the guards, the coming of night also worked to their advantage and they disappeared into the wolfswood.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, Theon began to think of what they could do. They could try to venture through the forest, but they would have to avoid Deepwood Motte, as the Glovers hated the wildlings and would thus turn them back to Winterfell if they were caught. And they couldn’t go east, as everything up to the Dreadfort was a Bolton stronghold. South was out of the question, as they would easily be caught since the Boltons would expect that.

And so, their only hope was to find some way to reach either the western shore at the Sea Dragon Point and sail towards Bear Island or move further north towards the domain of the northern mountain clans, both of which would accept a Stark, even a disguised one.

“The lands of the mountain clans are too dangerous, especially with the wildlings south of the wall,” Jeyne said.

“But the Mormonts will definitely kill me, both for being a traitor and for being an ironborn,” Theon reasoned. “Plus, I don’t know if we can find a boat that will take us to Bear Island.”

“But Bear Island is an island and if we can get there, we’ll be out of the Boltons’ reach,” Jeyne countered. “Plus, you’re an ironborn. You should know how to make a boat.”

“It’s not as simple as finding a log, making it hollow, and saying it could float. We’ll have to steal one, and even that in itself is risky,” Theon responded.

“But if we try to make for the northern mountain clans, we’ll have to pass by Deepwood Motte and they’ll just hand us back to the Boltons,” Jeyne was really afraid of that, after all that Ramsay had done to her. “If that happens, I will cut my wrists before I let that monster have his way with me again.”

“And I will hold the knife,” Theon offered. “But let’s hope that it doesn’t come to that.”

They couldn’t risk preparing a fire, as the Bolton trackers would spot them. Theon remembered what he learned from hunting but because they didn’t have any weapons on them, they couldn’t risk going after the big game. So, Theon and Jeyne were forced to subsist on raw rabbits, and they puked most of the time. When they did, they made sure to bury them so as to not create signs for the Bolton hunters.

However, weeks went by as they received little fresh food. The snow was their only source of water, but they had to wait for it to be melted down before drinking it, and even that wasn’t enough. Both Theon and Jeyne gradually became weaker and more sluggish as they ventured deeper into the woods.

Finally, they reached a point where the both of them couldn’t tell where they were going. They were at a loss of where they even were, as the trees looked the same as the last. Especially for Theon, the vision in his remaining good eye was getting cloudier, as he became more disoriented. He then tripped on a stone, but he couldn’t get up since he didn’t have the strength left in his arms to pick himself up. He looked over to his side and saw Jeyne also on the ground, her breathing turning into wheezing as she too was becoming weaker.
Theon stared up at the sky, looking up at the last piece of blue he would see before he would die of starvation and thirst. Before his mind slipped into what would be the waiting arms of death, he prayed to the skies above for the Drowned God and then the Old Gods, “Please forgive me. I would take it all back, if I could.”

In the darkness, he remembered all of the memories that he had, the ones from when life was still good. Swimming with his then-alive brothers, seeing the ships burn outside of Pyke during the Rebellion, hunting with Robb and Jon Snow in the wolfswood, the many times he bedded Ros, and finally knowing what it meant to lead on his own, even though that got him captured in the first place. He didn’t know where the rest of the Starks were, but he would die with the knowledge that he betrayed them and that he did nothing while Robb died.

He also remembered the moments he had with Asha, the only family that he wanted to keep in his life, as the rest abandoned him or scorned him for spending too many years on the greenlands for a rebellion that they themselves were responsible for. And he didn’t see his father in his memories, for he had denied his bond with him and decided that he was no longer his son. If there is one thing that I regret, I wasn’t a brother to anyone, not to Asha and not to Robb.

But the darkness turned into light, as the cold turned into warmth. He started to experience feeling in his fingers, then his hands, his arms, and his legs. His left eye started to roll before he opened it. Finding himself in what appeared to be a tent, he looked around and saw that he was covered in furs. Looking inside, he was shocked to see that his clothes were removed and the furs being the only cover for his bare body. Where am I? This has to be the afterlife, for it’s so warm here.

“Oh, good. You’re awake,” came a female voice. Turning his head to find the source, Theon saw what was obviously a wildling woman sitting next to him. She had a round face, crooked white teeth, small hands, and a pug nose, but she had pretty blue-grey eyes and curly bright red hair. From what Theon could make out from her leggings, this woman had legs that were skinny but well-built.

The woman wore layers of fur and wool and leather, a doeskin shirt and a sewn sheepskin helm. Stuffed against her were an axe and bone dagger, while a short curved bow of horn and weirwood lay next to her on the ground, with a quiver filled with arrows with pale grey goose feathers.

If Theon could stand up, he could see that he would tower over her, but considering that she was a wildling, it wouldn’t have mattered very much.

“Where am I?” Theon asked.

“You’re in our camp,” the red-haired woman told him. “You’ve been asleep for three days.”

Theon’s thoughts turned to Jeyne. “There was a woman with me---”

“She’s all right. She’s resting at another tent,” the red-haired wildling said. “What’s your name?”

Theon gulped, but considering that he was still alive and this woman had a part in it, his name was the least he could offer. “Theon… Greyjoy,” he rasped.

“Ygritte,” she smiled at him.

Interesting name, Theon thought. But then, with his bare body concealed only with furs, his eyes turned to them.

“I saw everything, so you have nothing to hide from me,” Ygritte jabbed at Theon. He couldn’t be ashamed, as he showed his body to many other women before. “Although I am interested in how
you only have one eye.”

Theon winced at the bad memory. “Someone pulled it out.”

“And yet, you could still see. Quite something if you ask me,” Ygritte then stood up before putting a hand on his cheek. “If you are able, I have some furs that you can wear. Mance Rayder might be interested in what you have to see.” And with that, she left the tent, but gave him one last smile.

Theon had seen such smiles before, in Myranda and Violet when they set upon him. Because of them, he would never look at another women’s lusty gaze the same way again. Must be careful.

Theon drank the water and dried meat set out for him in the tent and dressed himself in the furs prepared. Exiting the tent, he was disoriented in seeing tens of thousands of wildlings camped out somewhere in the North.

“Finally. I was wondering when you would show,” Ygritte surprised him. “Follow me.”

As Theon ventured further into the camp, the wildlings glanced at him before going about their business. What was most shocking to him was seeing at least a dozen giants congregated together while helping with setting up more tents.

“Surprised?” Ygritte noticed his reaction to the giants.

“I thought they were extinct,” Theon said in amazement.

“Not all, and not yet,” Ygritte answered before urging him to continue following her.

Eventually, they came upon a large tent, where Theon saw a large man with red hair, two beautiful women with blonde hair, an old man in a Night’s Watch cloak, and a middle-aged man in furs. They were in deep discussion over what seemed to be their continuing advance southwards. Upon Ygritte’s entry with Theon, all took notice.

“How is our guest, Ygritte?” the middle-aged man asked.

“Doing very well, considering what he’s just been through,” Ygritte answered. But upon seeing the Greyjoy, the Night’s Watchman tried to charge him, only to be stopped by the red-haired man and Ygritte.

“You treacherous bastard!” the old man spat.

“Jeor,” the middle-aged man grabbed his shoulders. “There will be no fighting amongst us right now. We have more important matters to discuss.” He then walked to Theon. “I’ve heard much about what the ironborn were, but I never seen a sadder excuse of a squid than right now.”

The others laughed at Theon’s expense, which he ignored. “And who might you be?”

“I am Mance Rayder, King Beyond the Wall,” Mance introduced himself. “You already met Ygritte and Lord Commander Jeor Mormont.” Theon’s eyes widened at the leader of the Night’s Watch being among the wildlings. “And this is Tormund Giantsbane, my wife Dalla and her sister Val.”

“What’s the Night’s Watch doing helping the wildlings?” Theon asked Jeor.

“Nothing that you won’t understand at the moment,” Jeor scoffed.

“Now, now, Jeor. We’re all fighting the same enemy here, but for now, I believe that Theon has
some information for us,” Mance stated.

“What information?” Theon was afraid.

“It’s obvious that you just came from the south. Ygritte’s group found you in the wolfswood, which would mean that you know something about the defenses of Deepwood Motte and Winterfell. Tell us what we need to know, and you’ll have a permanent place with us.”

Theon was tempted to help the wildlings destroy the Boltons, but he was also very apprehensive. “And why would I do that?”

“I talked with your woman companion,” Mance said. “She told me what happened to you and what the Bolts made you endure. Revenge is something that I can understand, and this is your best chance to do so. But of course, if you refuse, I have no problem having you starve. Everyone must earn their keep and you’re no exception.”

Theon sighed before nodding. There wasn’t much he could tell besides the garrison numbers and the condition of the Bolts’ defenses, both of which Mance had a good idea of, but it gave him some satisfaction in knowing that he would have a part in hurting his tormentors.

“We’ll talk more tomorrow,” Mance squeezed his shoulders before Tormund gave him a nod, Jeor a death glance, and Dalla and Val giving him a look of curiosity. Val seemed very interested in Theon, as her look was similar to the one Ygritte gave. Strangely, Ygritte didn’t mind and instead seemed to welcome the competition.

“I hear that you were a great archer,” Ygritte stated as they left the tent. “Perhaps we have a wager on who’s the better shot?”

For the first time in a long time, Theon felt the familiar urge to accept a challenge. However, he needed to be careful. “As you wish.”

Robb drew Ice from its wolf skin sheath before turning around and readying himself for the melee against one of Cayn Moss’ lieutenants.

“Valyrian steel,” he noted as he looked upon the ancestral sword of House Stark. “Let’s see if a failed king deserves such a fine blade.”

Normally, Robb would say something in response. But he was no longer a boy anymore and he wished to get this duel over with as quickly as possible. I don’t have time for this.

As promised, Cayn Moss allowed Robb to meet with the other lieutenants of the Company of the Rose. Jaenrya insisted on watching over their meeting, as she wanted to know more about the men protecting her and the one trying to buy them off of her.

“I know it’s been many generations since your families have seen the North,” Robb began. “And I am aware that I might not have the standing required to lead you all back there to fight for me. However, someone told me that how I deal with hardships will define who I am as a man and right now, I haven’t given up.”

“Why are you saying this to us?” a lieutenant asked him.

“I am willing to pay for your service, but gold is only a small portion of the rewards that will await you should you agree to fight for me,” Robb offered.
“And what else do you have to offer us?” another lieutenant by the name of Umber narrowed his eyes at Robb. “Land? Our own castles?”

“More than that,” Robb answered. “All of you can finally return to where your families were from. It’s a hard thing to leave what was once home, and I know what it feels like to not be near the place where I grew up. I can’t go back to Winterfell because the enemy holds it, but I will not allow my home to be occupied by those who betrayed my family. I want to go home and even though it’s been centuries since you were in the North, I’m sure that you want to go home too. That’s the choice I am offering.”

“And what do you hope to gain from hiring us? Surely, you don’t mean to get your crown back, as you couldn’t accomplish that with your own bannermen,” Cayn Moss said.

Now that they were asking the question, Robb hadn’t thought that far ahead. He didn’t intend to become King in the North again, as the war had made it clear that it was not a realistic goal. The northmen had fought well, but they were outnumbered and would be slowly diminished from attrition. And he realized after thinking more on it that the north couldn’t survive all on its own. The Seven Kingdoms simply couldn’t be undone after three centuries of rule under the Targaryens and Robert Baratheon and every kingdom was dependent on one another. However, he was at a loss on who he could back with the forces that were almost available to him. It took him the entire length of his hiding at Lord Royce’s hunting lodge to realize that.

Seeing his confusion, Jaenya stepped in. “Forgive me for saying this and I am not that familiar with Westeros’ politics, but perhaps it’s time to consider backing the family that rode dragons.”

Cayn Moss and his lieutenants were not very pleased with what she was implying, and so was Robb. “The northmen will never accept a Targaryen as a king. Torrhen Stark’s bending the knee and the Mad King’s murder of my grandfather and uncle are just a few of the reasons why that will never happen,” Robb stated.

“And Torrhen is the reason why we left,” Cayn Moss added. “A northmen will never serve a dragon.”

“But you will all have to, for the night is dark and full of terrors,” an unknown voice was heard. All were surprised when a red priestess and priest strode into their meeting place, the woman being of Yi-Tish origin. Robb remembered seeing her preach to a group of slaves to support Daenerys, but he was still surprised as to why she was there. “History is full of bad blood between men, but all of that is irrelevant against the great evil that’s coming.”

“The fuck is this?” Cayn Moss exclaimed. “What in gods’ names are you talking about?”

“I saw in the flames three heads of the dragon, one head born of sand, one head born from the storm, and one head born from ice,” the Yi-Tish red priestess declared. “They all combined together to create a force powerful enough to fight against the great evil that is coming, but they cannot hope to accomplish that alone. They need everyone they can get, and everyone in this room has a part to play.”

Cayn and his lieutenants grumbled at the red faith trying to dictate their purpose, while Robb was more skeptical.

“I see that you are still not understanding, but that’s all right,” she turned her head to Robb. “You, a man who thinks he lost everything, still have much time to fulfill your role in this world and truly be a man born from the ice. Frost that is still collecting is weak, but after a while, it becomes frozen and it takes more than a man’s strength to break it. You have past the first stage, and you
must enter the second.”

Robb’s head was hurting from the riddle. “I have no patience for words that are not clear to me, witch.” He was about to leave in a huff.

“You’ve seen the dragon head born from ice before. You grew up with him, and your father kept who he really was hidden from your very gaze,” the priestess said. “You know him as your half-brother, but he is the son born from your aunt.”

Robb stopped in his tracks, as he realized just who he was talking about. “Jon?”

“That is not his birthname. His name is Daeron Targaryen, named after the Young Dragon.”

“Lies!” Robb yelled. “Jon is no Targaryen! He is a Stark!”

“He has both ice and fire in his veins, and he needs both to fight the great evil,” the priestess answered.

“And what is this great evil that you so talk about?” Cayn Moss was losing his patience.

“Your ancestors fought against it, as did mine,” the priestess replied. “And for many generations did we live in a world of night before the Lightbringer came.”

Robb scoffed, instantly knowing exactly what she was saying but he was not believing it. “The White Walkers don’t exist anymore.”

“I can go on forever to refute that, but that is not the point of why I am here. If you’re looking for a ruler to back, I would suggest backing Daenerys Targaryen. She’s going to need your help back in the Slaver’s Bay.”

“Where the tigers are currently fighting her forces.”

“Which is why she needs to win there before she can move forward.”

“And if Daenerys Targaryen is in the Slaver’s Bay…” Robb thought aloud as he tried to remember what the priestess said about the three heads of the dragon.

“She’ll be with your cousin, Robb Stark.”

Robb had to sit down, as he realized how long he was lied to. No matter what his mother and Sansa did, he always saw Jon as his brother. And he smiled when Jon got Ghost, far from the “runt of the litter” as Theon described him. And to wrestle with the knowledge that his father hid the truth… why did you do that, father?

But he put those thoughts aside, as he realized that if what the priestess was saying was true, and he was a son of Lyanna Stark, that meant that Rhaegar was his father. “Did Rhaegar Targaryen rape Lyanna?”

“I’ve heard about her, and who she was. Do you really believe that she would not have gone willingly with the dragon prince?” the Yi-Tish red priestess asked rhetorically.

Robb had seen everyone say that Arya was just like his aunt and if that was the case… How did our family become more complicated?

“If what you say is true, then you want us to fight for Daenerys Targaryen?” Cayn Moss asked.
“Yes,” the red priestess answered. “And everything that Robb Stark offered to you all will come to pass, and more.”

“But before we even consider working for him, a direct descendant of Torrhen Stark, let’s see if he’ll be worth following,” another lieutenant stood up and went near Robb. “I hereby challenge you to melee combat.”

“I second that,” Cayn Moss also wished to see Robb Stark fight. “Let’s see if he is worth the investment. Just like the Company of the Rose doesn’t break contracts, our clients must uphold certain standards. We don’t need another wimp to take orders from.”

Robb couldn’t turn down the challenge, as he needed to behave like his own people if he wanted to return home again. And he couldn’t be soft, as that was part of the reason why he lost the war. And so, without hesitation, he drew Ice.

Immediately, Cayn Moss and the lieutenants started to wager who would win as Robb and Hallis circled each other. He unsheathed a longsword, made of regular steel, but Hallis was an experienced fighter and thus would not be easy to take down. Without warning, Hallis charged at Robb.

Fortunately, Ice’s greater reach allowed Robb to have an initial advantage. They were both northmen by blood and possessed great endurance in matches of strength, but Robb was not about to waste his time when he had little to none of it on his side. Hallis acted like a bull would against another, trying to strike against the former King in the North by using his sword as a hammer. But each time Hallis swung at Robb, he dodged it and allowed the lieutenant to become slowly exhausted, made evident by how he was losing his breath and sweating profusely.

From Robb was seeing, Lieutenant Hallis did not expect a man much younger than himself to put up a good fight, especially one who tried to play king, and thus expected an easy fight. But Robb realized the error in his previous thinking and was not about to repeat them. All of the lessons he learned from Ser Rodrik Cassel were coming back to him, but he was not about to play fairly, as the man before him had years of experience and he was not going to take any unnecessary risks.

Pushing Ice against Hallis’ sword, he brought its hilt up and also struck him in the forehead while kneeing him hard in the gut, causing him to fall down and catch his breath. By instinct, Robb dropped Ice, kicked Hallis onto his side, and struck him hard in the face.

Before Robb could lay down more blows, Cayn Moss got between them. “That’ll do,” he nodded to the former King in the North before helping Hallis back up.

Jaenyra clapped her hands at the spectacle. “Very good, Robb Stark. It seems that you were not crowned king for no reason. But let’s hope that you continue to be this good, when you do sail to the Slaver’s Bay.”

Robb was surprised. “So… you’ll help me?”

“As I said, I am against slavery even though I live off of my family’s wealth, which came from slaves. And Daenerys Targaryen is a woman in power, so it would be a shame if she lost to men with small egos.”

Robb blinked in confusion. “You have a very interesting way of thinking.”

“You’re not a woman, so you can’t imagine how pleased I was to see a woman making small-minded men tremble,” Jaenyra then took her leave before inviting them all to dine with her.
Robb turned back to Hallis. “Are you all right?”

“Nice strike there,” Hallis rubbed his forehead. “Was wondering when you would start cheating.”

“Cheating is a term for boys who think that men will always be honorable,” Robb revealed with some bitterness.

“Well said,” Cayn Moss grinned. “We’ll talk more over dinner, regarding the terms you have for us.”

“I look forward to it,” Robb answered as the Captain-General of the Company of the Rose and the lieutenants took their leave as well. He then saw the red priestess still watching him. “I would like to know more about what you seen in your flames about my brother. I will accept that he is not my father’s son, but that doesn’t change my bond with him.”

“If only more men thought like you,” the red priestess said approvingly. “Perhaps if have time after your dinner and while you are still here in Volantis, you can come by our temple and meet our head priestess, Kinvara. She’ll have much to say to you.”

“I look forward to it.” Even though Robb followed the old gods and was familiar with the Seven, he wanted to know more about the people who were helping him. There are still so many things that I don’t know about this world. I guess nothing is so simple after all.

Scratching Grey Wind’s head, who licked his hand at his companion’s victory, Robb began to ponder the irony of his situation, a Stark about to support a Targaryen. If only my mother knew what he really was, he thought of Jon. But where is Jon, since he can’t be at the Wall if what the Red Priestess said was true?

Oberyn opened the letter from Sunspear, which was written in Doran’s own hand. Of course, given the times that they were in, Doran written in a certain code that only those of Martell blood would understand, and only those who knew how to decipher it would be able to discern the message. It was particularly useful against Grandmaester Pycelle and especially the worm Qyburn, both of whom had access to ravens and could open each of the messages.

To the normal eye, Doran sent a message that talked about the budding marriage between Trystane and Myrcella, which was distasteful to Oberyn considering that a girl of Lannister and Baratheon blood was near their home. Doran always wanted to be near the throne and Oberyn couldn’t blame him for having such ambitions, but he was negotiating with the very people that killed Elia and the ones who humiliated their family.

Underlining each of the words that stood out, Oberyn was able to piece together the message:

“Dearest brother,

As of this letter, twenty thousand Dornish spears will pass through the Boneway and into the stormlands to fight against Stannis Baratheon. Every one of them will be paid with Lannister gold and we shall eliminate one obstacle against the advancement of our house.

But this is all a smokescreen, as I intend to bleed the Lannisters dry and the Dornish spears I’ve sent will not be used solely against Stannis. Once they’re in position, they will form the core of our force that will march on King’s Landing in support of our nephew, Aegon the Sixth of His Name.

Yes, brother. I have received word that our dear nephew and niece from Elia’s womb are in fact alive and they shall be our next king and queen. Together, they will form the bulwark against the
pretender Daenerys Targaryen and the bastard Jon Snow, who claims himself as Daeron Targaryen, the Third of His Name.

At the moment, please keep me updated on the happenings of the Red Keep. We must be vigilant, for the survival and elevation of our house depends on it.

Doran.”

Setting down the letter, Oberyn looked up to the ceiling and sighed. He very much wanted to tell the truth to everyone, but he had the good sense to understand that it wouldn’t do much good at this point. Will it?

He felt a pair of hands slide down his chest and a kiss on his ear. “What’s the matter, my love?” Oberyn heard Ellaria whisper.

He smiled at her touch and concern. “Got a letter from Doran. You’re not going to believe this,” he handed her the full message, which Ellaria read quickly.

She gasped. “Is it true?”

“I don’t know,” Oberyn admitted. “And that’s what’s frightening. But I know that he’s wrong about this Daeron.”

Oberyn told her what really happened during the Rebellion, a truth that had to remain hidden, so she knew what he was talking about. “But my love, you can’t just take this to your grave. Someday, you’ll have to tell someone.”

“And I will, but the timing is not right at the moment,” Oberyn answered. “And I don’t want to say any details in here, especially since Qyburn and Pycelle certainly have their rats scampering about.”

Ellaria nodded in understanding. “I sometimes wish I was back in Hellholt, where life was simpler there. But simplicity means boring, and that wasn’t why I decided to be with you and give birth to your daughters.”

Oberyn laughed as he kissed her again, and they would have bedded each other again had it not been a sudden thought that came to his mind. “That reminds me. When are we to move out and meet Lord Yronwood?” As the member for Dorne on the small council, he made to make sure that the Dornish spears were in good order as they marched on Blackhaven.

“We can leave in a week. I honestly am glad to be leaving this city, as I have to look over my shoulder every time I tumble with the whores in Flea’s Bottom,” Ellaria clearly enjoyed that, but she was very annoyed that someone dared to watch her.

“There will probably be more whores to enjoy as we move south. And while there, I might have to make a visit to Doran, see what his plan is.”

“No rush,” Ellara kissed him again before grabbing the letter and burning it. The paramour of the Red Viper knew exactly how to conduct herself in the snake pit that was the Red Keep, and it made Oberyn feel blessed at having this woman in his life. I don’t have to tell her what to do and she doesn’t need me to lean on, but she wants to be with me.

Oberyn passed by the training yard of the Red Keep, where his daughters Obarra, Nymeria, Tyene, and Elia, the Sand Snakes who knew how to fight were training. Many of the guards and knights were scandalized at seeing women fighting with weapons, but Oberyn and his family knew that
they looked down on them at their own peril. As much as he wanted to hug them all, he had more important business to discuss that morning. *What am I doing? Why am I acting more like Doran every day?*

Coming to where Margaery Tyrell and Olenna had sat in the gardens of the Red Keep, he cleared his throat. Both turned around and he kissed their hands in greeting. “Thank you very much for meeting us, Prince Oberyn,” Margaery smiled.

“No problem. It’s not every day that one gets a private meeting with the true rose of Highgarden,” Oberyn said courteously while also giving her a suggestive grin.

But Olenna was not patient with his antics. “Oh, stop that, Prince Oberyn. We didn’t invite you here so that you could eye-fuck my granddaughter.” The thorn of Highgarden gestured them all to sit down. “What’s your brother’s goal, Prince Oberyn?”

“I’m… not quite sure what you are referring to,” Oberyn was cautious.

“We have received word that Prince Quentyn is in Tollos, with the ones they are calling Aegon and Rhaenyrs Targaryen along with Lord Jon Connington and the Golden Company,” Margaery revealed. “We also have word on the Volantene movements against Daenerys Targaryen in the Slaver’s Bay.”

Oberyn crossed his arms. “Why do you ask me? My brother does many things that I am not privy to.”

“We know that Prince Doran could’ve funded the Dornish spears marching against Stannis by himself, but why ask Tywin to fund them?” Olenna thought aloud. “Is it because he wants to bleed the Lannisters dry and weaken Stannis at the same time while also allowing the path to be cleared for Aegon to come?”

Oberyn had to be reminded that Olenna Tyrell wasn’t called a thorn for nothing. “That’s a pretty far-fetched conclusion that you have, my lady.”

“But not exactly far-fetched, considering that Elia was raped and murdered by the Mountain, who still lives, and that the situation is becoming more tenuous with Daenerys and the one called Daeron running about. I’m guessing that they want to eliminate Daenerys first before moving onto Westeros, but I’m not sure how they might deal with the one they named after the Young Dragon,” Margaery added.

“Your Grace, you’re assuming that I know my brother’s plans, when in fact, he keeps a distance from me because of my impulsive tendencies. I haven’t properly settled down and the only reason why he agreed to me being here was because he felt burdened by my presence in Sunspear. You’re assuming a close relationship between us when that is far from the truth,” Oberyn had to keep up a façade, but he wasn’t completely lying.

“My, my. Didn’t know that you’ll be worked up by us talking about him,” Olenna was surprised. “Which reminds me. When we mentioned Daeron the first time, you were quite calm. Considering that Rhaegar abandoned your sister for the Stark girl, I would have assumed you having more of an explosive reaction to the whole situation.”

Oberyn sighed, fighting the temptation to reveal the truth. “What happened to my sister was something that should have never happened, but I wish to move on from it. Would you be asking those questions if you knew what it was like to have your family be so brutalized?”
Margaery and Olenna glanced at each other. “Thank you for your time, Prince Oberyn.”

Oberyn moved out of the gardens, but he failed to see the able women of House Tyrell eyeing him with more suspicion than ever. As he walked away, he began to remember the time Elia went northwards in secret, contrary to what he said about trying to move on.

“Are you crazy? Do you know what this would do?” Oberyn was shocked that Elia would do such a thing.

“In the time that I met Lyanna, I realized how happy she made Rhaegar. And because he was happy, he became a better lover to me and a better father to both Rhae and Egg,” Elia revealed to him.

But Oberyn sensed more. “You feel something for this Stark girl, don’t you?” Elia blushed, causing him to laugh in amusement. “If only I knew earlier... I can’t say I blame you, since the ones I tumble with are men also. But if you do this, Robert Baratheon and the Mad King will not let this go.”

“I am in love with Rhaegar again, and Lyanna is making my life worth living. I am not going to let the best thing that has happened to the both of us just slip away.”

Oberyn nodded, not going to deny his sister the chance at renewed happiness. “What do you want me to do?”

“Lie to Doran and say that I had to see someone I met from the tourney. He’s not going to ask many questions since he’s all the way in Sunspear.”

“All right,” Oberyn granted her request, causing Elia to kiss his cheek.

“Thank you, brother. We’ll see each other again.”

Oberyn knew that Elia was in love with Lyanna as much as she was in love with Rhaegar again, and it was he who suggested that they spend some time enjoying their new marriage at the tower of joy while making sure that everything was under wraps while also watching over Rhaenys, who visiting her father and mothers.

But one thing led to another and the Rebellion saw Rhaegar die on the Trident and both Elia and Lyanna dying. Oberyn knew that Lyanna was pregnant, but there was a limit to how much he could lie to Doran and thus turned a blind eye when Ned led his party to the tower of joy. It pained him to have Lyanna’s child be left to the mercy of the elements, but Doran would see right through him and to say nothing was better than to deceive.

But Oberyn knew that he was going to be damned to the Seven Hells because he didn’t do enough. I could’ve got them all out, but I was too afraid of Doran to do anything. And that was the burden that he would have to carry.

But the prospect of Rhaenys alive and Daeron being the child of Lyanna brought hope for his redemption, and Oberyn wasn’t going to hesitate when the chance offered itself. Please, Elia. Let me make this right. Please speak to my heart when the time comes, he tried to reach out to his sister.

Jon found himself in the midst of a forest of weirwoods. He said to himself, “Is this what the afterlife looks like?” But through the forest, he could see a lake at the other side. Curious, he ran through the weirwoods, each of their faces staring at him like the one at Winterfell.
Upon reaching the shore of the lake, he saw a man sitting upon a boulder, enjoying the calmness of the lake in front of him. Walking closer to him, he recognized the unmistakable form of Ned Stark. Sensing his presence, the one who was a father to him turned around and saw Jon. “Hello, Jon.”

Without hesitation, Jon ran up to the man who raised him and hugged him tightly. “Is it really you?” he was near crying.

“Aye, it’s me,” Ned held back his own tears.

They spent a few moments in each other’s embrace, Jon in grief that the last moment he saw Ned was when he promised to tell him about his mother before he went off to the Wall. He couldn’t hold back anymore, and Jon was now letting his tears flow. Being the older man, Ned also struggled to not sob.

“I should have protected you. I should have gone with you,” Jon said against his chest.

“No, no. You wouldn’t have done any good if you came with me,” Ned shook his head.

“Everything happens for a reason, and I long accepted that my death would be the one thing that will propel you all to where you need to be. You came east and you’ve learned how to live on your own amongst those that wish to do you harm. I should have learned how to do that before I condemned my children to misery.”

“But that still wasn’t enough,” Jon answered bitterly. “I still died.”

“Yes, but you are not done yet,” Ned shook his head.

“What do you mean?”

“It means that you are not meant to be here for many more years,” Jon heard a woman’s voice call to him. Turning around, Jon blinked as if to check if his eyes were deceiving.

Before him stood a woman that he had only seen the likeness of in the crypts of Winterfell. The one they called that they called the wolf maid, the one that was crowned the queen of love and beauty at Harrenhal. She had the classic northern beauty. Wild and fierce, passionate and loving, the physical manifestation of the North. Wearing a dark blue dress, she reminded Jon of what Arya would be like in a decade or two.

But next to her hands, clasped together in a show of affection, was a silver-haired man. The man was tall, hair cropped to above his shoulders, where were broad, and taller than the woman by a head. Clad in a knight’s tunic and breeches, he also looked like a man whose smile would make any maiden blush and who commanded an air of intelligence and culture about him.

When both were paired together, Jon was reminded of when he saw Robert and Cersei together, and the Baratheon king and queen paled in comparison to the power he saw in the pair in front of him.

In his heart, Jon knew who they were. "M…” He knew what he wanted to say, but could barely form the word. It was just so surreal. "Mother?” He turned to the man next to her. “Father?”

“If only we were alive to see you become the man before us now,” Rhaegar Targaryen showed his pride in Jon. Instinctively, Jon moved away from Ned and ran up to his dead parents. He didn’t care how hard he collided with them, for this was the first time he met the people who sired him.

Jon cried between the shoulders of his mother and father, as Lyanna kissed the top of his head and
he could feel her tears while his father, disciplined as ever and needing to show what a strong father should be, patted his back.

“I’m glad to finally meet you,” Lyanna choked. “Even though you’re not supposed to be here for many more years.”

Jon’s heart wrenched. “I… don’t know where to start. There are so many things that I want to say to you.”

“And there are many things that we want to say to you,” Rhaegar smiled at him. “My, my. You’ve gone into a fine young man. You don’t have the silver hair and purple eyes of the dragons, but you are a dragon all the same.”

“And a wolf,” Lyanna pinched Jon’s cheek. “I only held you once before I made Ned promise to protect you. And he did,” Ned modestly accepted her look of thanks. “However, you’re not done yet. You still have work to do.”

“But what about us?” Jon was frantic, as he didn’t want to leave his parents after seeing them for the first time. “I want to stay here with you, with my father, with my uncle. There are so many things that I never got to share with you.”

“And you will share them in due time,” Rhaegar put his hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Come. Walk with us.”

They walked along the shores of the lake, enjoying the warm sun and the breeze that set it. “So, you’ve gone to the east? To Yi-Ti?”

“Yes, father,” Jon answered.

“Then you’ve gone further than anyone of us could ever dream of,” Rhaegar sighed. “You’ve already experienced things that only a few of us could ever hope to see, but all of your lessons will have to be put to good use, for you must prepare yourself for the great evil that is coming.”

“I know. I only wish that I had more time,” Jon said with regret. “I let myself be a fool and I got trapped and killed.”

“And you’re not done. Your journey is far from over, for if you made it this far, you can go further,” Lyanna told him.

“But how? I’m dead.”

“Who said that death is the end?” Jon froze, for he heard that voice before. Looking to the lake, the four of them saw the surface of the water ripple before the dragon spirit flew out and emerged. “I should know.”

“You… what are you doing here?” Jon was confused.

“Oh, you’ve met it,” Rhaegar noted. “I was surprised too.”

“You know it?” Jon asked his father in surprise.

“Yeah, yeah, we can go over who knows me all day long, if the day even applies here,” the dragon spirit was clearly impatient. “But most importantly, you will be come back to life.”

“How do you think that will happen?” Jon inquired.
“Someone will come to your palace, someone who knows how to fear a deity like myself, and he’ll perform the necessary rituals for you to come back. It appears that you truly do have a purpose for the fight against the Long Night after all, a central one.”

“You mean… I’m the Lightbringer, the prince who was promised?” Jon was stunned.

“But without two more at your side, your role will not be fulfilled,” the dragon spirit revealed.

“Two more?”

“It’s talking about Daenerys, your aunt, and your sister, Rhaenys.”

Jon felt as if the words stopped in his throat. “Sister?”

“Rhaenys is alive, my daughter and the other joy of Lyanna,” Rhaegar said in sadness. “But she had to live a hard life due to who she was. She had nobody and she has become bitter.”

“But how? How did my sister survive the Mountain?”

“It wasn’t her at all, but a double put there by someone I thought I could trust,” Rhaegar answered.

“And now, she is with a false dragon and she knows that she’s alone amongst those who would kill her if it suited their purposes,” Lyanna was worried.

“By two more, you mean to say…” Jon knew what the ending of his inquiry was, but all of it seemed so unreal for him.

“Don’t tell me that you are bothered by the fact that they are related to you,” Rhaegar rubbed Jon’s hair.

“Of course not,” Jon denied. “I just can’t believe that Rhaenys is alive. I know Daenerys will open her arms to me, but Rhaenys will be bitter as you said. What if she’s thinking, ‘Daeron, why did you leave me here?’”

“She won’t,” Lyanna clasped her hands with Jon’s. “You were just born, so you couldn’t do anything. But if she wants to be with her true family again, she has to accept you. In time, you might also care for her and love her as you do with Daenerys.”

“Your family prides itself in being the three-headed dragon,” the dragon spirit rejoined them. “But without one or the other, it’s incomplete. Only with you three together can the true power of the dragon be unleashed.”

Jon nodded in acceptance. “Okay, but you still haven’t answered one very important question. How am I going to come back to life?”

The dragon spirit clicked his tongue. “Looks like it’s time. Say your goodbyes to your parents and uncle, for by the time I breath fire on you, you will reenter the world of the living.”

In desperation, Jon hugged and squeezed all three. “Please don’t leave me.”

“We’ll always be with you, son,” Rhaegar assured him. “But now, you must go.”

Lyanna kissed his forehead and cheek while clearly saddened. “You were not meant to die so early. But we will see each other again.”
Ned clasped his shoulder. “Don’t make the same mistakes that I did. You are a wolf, a Stark, and a man of honor. But you are also a dragon. Be a dragon.”

Jon bobbed his head as the three stepped back. Jon faced the dragon spirit as it opened its mouth. “All right. I’m ready.”

“We’ll meet again. Very soon,” the dragon spirit then poured white fire on Jon, consuming in white light as it blinded him. Covering his eyes, he groaned in pain from how strong it was.

When he opened his eyes again, Jon breathed in and out. He found himself lying on a wooden slab, dressed in fresh clothes and surrounded by Arya, Sam, Benjen, Gendry, and Ghost. All were startled at Jon’s reappearance, while all four of them slowly began to process that he was alive.

“Jon!” Arya ran up to him and hugged him. “How?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Jon answered while Benjen and Sam also join in on the hug. All cried tears of relief at him being brought back to life, the pain healing and them reassured that he was truly alive.

Ghost licked his hands and Jon scratched his face while Meleys roared in delight. But then, he looked upon the shadow man that he had met, who he did not expect to see there.

But there was something about his eyes, as they were brown the last time he saw them and were now bright red.

“I asked you once if you could live with the consequences of your actions,” Ardroon asked.

But Jon was beyond shocked, as there was only one being who asked him that. “You?”

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter and much to cover. Arya embracing more of her dark side, Benjen learning something from Mingyu, the Hound establishing a relationship and becoming a demon hunter, Daenerys getting arrested while one step closer to Jon, our first Theon POV where he meets Ygritte, Mance, and the other wildlings, Robb getting the Company of the Rose, Oberyn in KL while we see the truth that he hid, and Jon coming back to life.

I never intended for Jon to stay dead for long, but Ned telling him to be a dragon will lead to him doing things that he would have hesitated in doing. And for those who were skeptical on how I handled him dying, I hope this is satisfactory. Also, how he died plays into the theme of Game of Thrones, as you can't really trust anybody besides family. Just like with politicians, criminals cannot be seen as trustworthy people.

Hope you enjoyed it. See you next time!
Sansa walked alongside Harrold Hardyng in the halls of the Eyrie, getting to know the current heir of the Vale a little better. Although she liked his company, she knew that she had to keep a distance from him, applying Littlefinger’s advice to make Harrold put more effort in pursuing her and also because she was slowly getting bored of his personality. At least he’s not cruel. I can handle arrogance, nothing I am not familiar with.

Sansa had witnessed the tourney for the future members of the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights. Although he wasn’t wearing her favor, Harrold Hardyng kept looking at Sansa and she merely smiled back in response. And as expected, Harrold Hardyng became the champion of the tourney, thus guaranteeing him a place in the new guard for her cousin Robert. I’m very afraid of how he would respond to Ser Harrold winning, especially since Robin doesn’t really like him.

The other members of the order who placed very highly in the tourney and melee matches were Ser Andrew Tollett, Ser Lucas Corbray, Ser Lymond Lynderly, Ser Ben Coldwater, Ser Ossifer Lipps, Ser Edmund Breakstone, and Ser Artyss Arryn from Gulltown. Everyone was surprised at the sudden involvement of the Arryns from Gulltown, since they all knew that they were largely ignored from the rest of the Vale affairs. However, Robin welcomed Artyss’ presence and declared that he would be the first to be appointed by his sword, much to Lord Baelish’s consternation. He doesn’t want another Arryn, someone who could challenge Robin’s place in the Eyrie, no matter how distant they are from the main line, she thought.

As promised, Ser Artyss Arryn was the first to be appointed to the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights, with Sers Andrew Tollet, Lucas Corbray, Lymond Lynderly, Ben Coldwater, Ossifer Lipps, Edmund Breakstone, and Harrold Hardyng following in that order. Everyone that by appointing Ser Harrold last, he was showing to all that he was the least favored member of the new brotherhood. At the same time, everyone could slowly understand how feeble Robin was in actually ruling the Vale, which would allow an opening for the Lords Declarant and also damage Robin’s position.

As a further show of favor for his distant Arryn relative, Robin wanted to make Artyss Arryn the Lord Commander despite him only receiving his spurs a few years ago. Naturally, Lord Baelish talked him out of that despite Robin’s growing obstinance. Even Sansa had to shake her head at her cousin’s rashness, which made her more relieved when he returned to Runestone. One more idea from him and we would see chaos emerge in the Vale.

And Sansa could see that besides Artyss Arryn, the knights that made up the new Brotherhood was also part of a strategy formed by Littlefinger. He couldn’t touch any members of houses such as
the Redforts, the Hunters, the Waynwoods, and the Royces for they were the prime members of the Lords Declarant. By having the houses each member represented on the Brotherhood, it was his way of getting new loyalties and also keeping those houses in line. *Keeping his friends close and any potential adversaries closer,* she saw.

The feast for the new members happened, the last night before Robin would be carted back to Runestone, and Sansa was drinking her wine and eating her lemon cakes before deciding to take a nice walk through the quiet halls of the Eyrie. Ser Harrold politely asked her if he could accompany her and she nodded yes.

“You’ve done well, Ser Harrold,” Sansa started. “I have to say that it’s been a long time since I watched a tourney with such excitement.”

“Thank you, Lady Alayne,” Harrold answered. “You’ve been to many tourneys, I trust?”

“A few, but all of them made me see that tourneys are a great escape from all of the tensions going on around us.” Sansa had to play the game.

“You have no idea how right you are,” Harrold exhaled. “With Lady Lysa, the Seven rest her soul, not allowing us to fight for either side, we watched as a war was concluded without our involvement. We train for battle and the one chance that we had to put our training into practice on the field of battle was wasted.”

*The same war that killed my parents, my brother, and left the others to be scattered,* Sansa criticized his self-centeredness. But he didn’t know who she was, and she had to keep it that way.

“I’m sure that with Robert Arryn as the lord, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to test your mettle against those who would wish him harm.”

“Oh, gods. Lord Robert, all due respect to him, I don’t worry about. It’s the people around him that worries me.”

“In what way?” Sansa had to know more.

“The only thing that is keeping the Vale at peace is him at the top. He is from Jon Arryn’s loins and it’ll be more beneficial to use his minority to gain what you want, just like what your father is doing.”

“My father had a close relationship with Lady Lysa and Lord Robert sees him as a good caretaker.”

“Respectfully, you would say that, and why wouldn’t you? He is your father after all.”

Sansa nodded in admittance, even though it was part of her cover. “How do you feel about our upcoming betrothal?” With the tourney over, it was only a matter of time and everyone in attendance knew it.

“Even though I didn’t wear your favor, I hope to be a good husband and a loyal man in your life,” Harrold declared. “And I am sorry again for insulting you.”

Sansa smiled. “It’s quite all right, Ser Harrold. With you bound to the daughter of the Lord Protector, I am sure that the Vale will be behind us and do their part in keeping this kingdom peaceful.”

Harrold was impressed. “Never had I met a young girl like yourself with such a strong commitment to duty. Now, I am sure that we will get along very well, for I shall cease my dalliances in order to
become a proper heir to the Vale. That is, should Lord Robert fail to find a proper wife.”

In another time of her life, she would have defended her cousin and stated that because he was young, he had time to correct whatever deficiencies he had. But after what she had seen, she realized that proper instruction had to instilled from childhood and a lack of that would doom the child to an unfavorable direction, the one that her cousin was taking. *Jon Arryn, why were you so neglectful of your only son?*

“And respectfully, Lord Robert appointing Ser Artys to the Brotherhood? Good thing he wasn’t made the Lord Commander, or everyone would have been in an uproar,” Harrold complained.

“Well, good thing that didn’t happen,” Sansa agreed.

“I mean, they might be Arryns, but I am closer to the lord paramountcy than they will ever be,” Harrold continued. “If you think about it, already having the Arryn name doesn’t actually matter in the grand scheme of things. Should Robert die without an heir, I will have a choice between choosing to retain my Hardyng name or assuming the Arryn one. That’s too far in the future, I know, but I have that choice, whereas those uncouth slime from Gulltown don’t.”

Sansa held back a heavy exhale. “I wonder if Lord Robert would be more active in taking measures in ensuring the survival of House Arryn.”

“And I will do that job for him, if we follow through with the betrothal and consummate it.”

*Don’t be so presumptuous,* Sansa silently groaned.

“In any way, I am glad that the betrothal will happen. And I hope that we can be happy,” Harrold finished with.

“Likewise. I must retire for the night, so I shall see you in the morning, good ser.”

“Have a good night,” Harrold bowed before heading back to the feast.

As Sansa was about to enter her chambers, she found Littlefinger waiting for her with that smile of his. “Never have I been prouder of you than now.”


“You reeled Ser Harrold in like a fish and now you have declaring that he will make you happy. Things have never been better right now,” Petyr Baelish showed his pride. “You’ve done well.”

“Only doing what you taught me,” Sansa simply answered.

“And with Ser Harrold in your grasp, in our grasp, the time has come to plan the next step.”

“And what would that be?” Sansa wanted Baelish to say it out aloud.

“Why, retaking your birthright. Winterfell. The North. What else are we talking about?” Baelish showed his slight disappointment at Sansa seemingly forgetting her goals.

“No, I haven’t forgotten. But are you sure that the Vale will rally to me just because of a simple betrothal?” Sansa was skeptical.

“Come now, Sansa,” Baelish put his hands on her shoulders. “Everyone could see that Sweetrobin is not fit to rule the Vale, and I am the only one making sure that there is a Vale for him to rule over. We have to make sure that someone abler, but still responsive to our will, take over this
kingdom and Harrold is our best chance. And once the betrothal has been announced. It’s only a matter of time before each of the Vale houses come to fight for us.”

“What about the Lords Declarant? They’re certainly not going to fight for us with you behind me,” Sansa argued for the opposing side.

“I shall deal with Lord Royce, Lady Waynwood, and the others soon, but if they won’t commit their troops for me, they will surely do so if it’s your wish. And I shall persuade Sweetrobin to support you, which will make the Valemen obligated to follow you to the North.”

Sansa bobbed her head, since Littlefinger did come up with a plan that had a chance of success. More importantly, she missed home and she was willing to do what it took to get back there. “What about the Boltons and the wildlings? I’m sure the both of them will not just let us march in there without a fight.”

“Roose Bolton’s time will come, ever since he failed to hold the wildlings,” Littlefinger stated. “And Mance Rayder can only go so far before he meets stronger resistance. With the Boltons bungling their rule of the north, there will be those who wish for the Starks to return, one of them being the Manderlys.”

“You sure?” Sansa jumped at the mention of their name.

“Lord Manderly has not only refused to help Roose Bolton, he’s outright resisting him. As the only powerful house in the North that has not been affected by the wildlings, it’ll be in our benefit to approach him and make an alliance with White Harbour. With his four thousand men, we’ll have the starting advantage. We can also send ravens to other houses such as the Mormonts, the Flints, the Pooles, the Cerwyns, and even the Reeds. Meanwhile, I shall see if I can persuade the Karstarks and Umbers to defect to our cause, for they will be very angry at Lord Roose for not protecting their homes.”

Sansa hid her expressions, but it was clear that she was very pleased with the situation. Nodding her consent for Lord Baelish to do what he did best, Sansa could feel home just inches from her grasp and could see herself inside the halls of Winterfell already. She was going to go home, and there was nothing that anyone or anything could do to stop her. *I’ll avenge you Robb, father, mother, Arya, Brandon, and Rickon. I shall go to Winterfell myself and kill the traitors. And I will make sure that our house will never be weak again,* she promised herself.

Jon walked around the hallways of his palace, feeling strange despite being brought back to life. And it didn’t help that his servants and other members of his household were outright afraid of him, perceiving him as a ghost sent to punish those who killed him and expressing their fear by avoiding him however possible.

Ghost strode closely by his side, never again to leave him in order to avoid a repeat. And Meleys purred in delight when she saw her rider alive and well, with Jon responding by placing his forehead on her snout. *It’s okay, girl. I am here,* he assured her.

Feeling drowsy at the moment, Jon decided to talk to his resting area in his palace, prepare a rag drenched with warm water, and place it over his face. It was a common relaxation technique practiced throughout the empire, so he decided to give it a try. Immediately, he felt calmer and decided to use what respite he could get from such a trying time. But as he relaxed, his thoughts turned back to when he was immediately resurrected.

*As soon as he breathed and snapped his eyes open, Arya was on him while Benjen pulled him into*
a tight hug, both of them crying tears of relief for his return. Jon hugged them back, happy to see his family still alive and well. He kissed the top of Arya’s head while tightening his hold on his uncle.

“Jon, I’m so happy that you’re alive,” Arya cried out. Jon couldn’t say anything, for even he wasn’t completely understanding how this happened, and so did his uncle Benjen. As for Sam and Gendry, they simply smiled at him coming back to life and allowed the family space in which to comfort each other. Ghost licked his hands while Jon could sense the joy in Meleys.

However, he then spotted the shadow man who he met at Jinqi, but once he told him that statement about consequences, he sensed that there was something else inside of his body. And there was one who said that to him.

“You?” Jon was shocked.

“Yes, yes,” the dragon spirit inside of Ardroon was immediately bored. “It’s been a while, Daeron Targaryen. And it’s quite something for you to be able to have such thoughts after being brought back to live. Although I have to admit that it is difficult to even think encased in this rotting piece of meat.” The dragon spirit had the body pull out a knife and start cutting his hand, alarming everyone in the room besides Jon. As he squeezed his fist, the blood dripped out. “The stink of it filling every breath, a suffocating cloud you can’t escape.” The dragon spirit scoffed. “Disgusting. How pathetically fragile it is. Nothing this weak is meant to survive.”

Jon blinked. “Then why are you in it?”

“Because this vessel is the only thing that is comprehensible to you people,” the dragon spirit stared at everyone. “Life goes on, but there’s always a regression with each generation. The first men that I encountered were great people, but now… it’s telling of a species when they become so weak after becoming complacent, when they no longer have to fight for their food as much as before.”

Arya took offense. “I don’t know who you are, but that’s not true. I had to survive for days without eating.”

“But you still had food to steal from, fields that were plowed, grain that was harvested, animals to be slaughtered. The first people that walked on this world had none of that, and those who survived were able to reproduce. Although, I must say if their efforts to stay alive were worth it.”

Arya tightened her fist while Benjen was very offended. “Now, hold on a moment. You don’t get to —”

“Quiet, you child,” the dragon spirit hissed. “You know nothing of what I speak of.”

“Child?” Benjen took a step forward towards Ardroon before it snapped his fingers and Benjen was frozen in place. Everyone was surprised when he couldn’t move, and he strained in vain. “What did you do to me?”

“I have no patience for needless violence, which I find to be very ungrateful after what I did to save your nephew.” The dragon spirit snapped his fingers again and Benjen collapsed to the ground, with Arya helping him out.

“May I ask how you brought me back to life?” Jon had to know.

“An ancient practice long lost to the world. I had to light a fire from these hands and exhale smoke into your nose. And to explain it will take too long, for I believe you have other matters to attend
Jon gulped, only realizing just what true power looked like. If he could bring back the dead, there’s really nothing that I understand, he thought.

But as the dragon spirit correctly pointed out, he didn’t have to time to convalesce. He had to get back to work and so, he made his way to Princess Khiara’s palace, as he needed to ensure that their alliance was still in effect.

As it was in his palace, everyone in her household was afraid of him, but he didn’t pay them any mind. Approaching her door, he told her guard, “Announce my presence.” The guard obeyed and he was therefore allowed entry. He saw Khiara sitting at her small table, going through a scroll of what appeared to be an official correspondence, before she looked up and set it down.

“Thank the gods that you are all right,” Khiara stood up, seeming to be genuinely happy that he was alive.

Be careful, he warned himself. “I am still confused as to why I am still alive,” Jon answered.

“Well, let’s not dwell on that for long,” Khiara invited him to sit down with her. “Things have been very busy while you were dead.”

“I can imagine.”

“Of huge significance, your aunt Daenerys Targaryen appeared in the empire,” Khiara revealed.

To say that he was shocked would have been an understatement. “What are you talking about?”

“Apparently, Daenerys Targaryen appeared in the Northwest Province three moons ago, Seong Kitara was hiding her in the Northwest Province for that period of time, and they were arrested by a battalion of soldiers in Asabhad.”

Jon was very worried now. “What do you mean arrested?”

“Oh, right. You don’t know yet. Apparently, she has been accused of ordering the deaths of merchants from our empire because her forces thought that they were supplying weapons to the slave masters. She’s now facing charges of murder and violating neutrality while Seong Kitara and Hoon Ti will go to trial for aiding and abetting an enemy of the empire.”

Jon’s mind became overwhelmed with how much was going through it. The woman that he had only seen through his dreams, the woman that he had grown to love even without seeing her, the woman who let him know that he was not alone, the woman who was a dragon like himself… she’s here.

“Where is she?”

“In an army prison. As she was taken into custody by a battalion of combat troops, they have authority.”

“But combat troops arresting her? Shouldn’t that had been handled by local constables?”

“To put it simply, the Prime Minister arrested her using the most messed up logic even for me. And no, you cannot see her. Her only appearance will be for her trial, because the Prime Minister knows that you’ll try to do something to save her since she’s family.”
Jon was taken aback at how prepared the Prime Minister was. “But she’s a queen. Why put her in an army prison?”

“It’s a scare tactic,” Khiara answered. “By surrounding her with hardened soldiers and placing her in squalid conditions, the Prime Minister is trying to intimidate her and maybe break her down. That way, she’s cooperative during the trial and preluding interrogations.” Jon didn’t need to hear more, for he turned around and began to walk out of her palace. “I wouldn’t go to her if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“As I told you before, I am not privy to what bonds you have with her. But if you really want to save her life, we have to be smart about this. You try to interfere with a trial with my father as the judge—”

“Wait,” Jon stopped her. “The emperor himself is the judge?”

“And that’s why you need to listen to me,” Khiara emphasized. “There’s a lot of pressure in court to have Daenerys punished and even though you came back to life, you are still a Targaryen and they will only see you trying to help her as a sign that you cannot be trusted. You will endanger not only yourself, but everyone connected to you.”

Jon sighed in frustration, but he couldn’t deny her logic. “So now what?”

“We let the trials go forward, but the one advantage we have is that the emperor will not pass sentence until he’s heard all of the evidence. That gives two weeks at the minimum to plan our next move. Don’t worry, I will not allow a dragon rider to be killed.”

Another question popped into Jon’s mind. “Why are you helping her?”

“The Prime Minister might think that he will secure his power by destroying the Targaryens, both you and her, and that’s an opportunity I must take. He spent too long at the top of the power hierarchy and thinks that nothing can touch him, but I intend to prove him wrong. And what’s more, he has been a thorn on my side long enough. He must be eliminated.”

Nothing’s changed, Jon thought.

“Which reminds me. Daenerys Targaryen is a dragon rider, so where is her dragon?”

“That… I don’t know,” he said truthfully

Khiara was not convinced, but she left it at that. “Prepare yourself, Prince Daeron. The trial will happen, but also know that we have work to do.”

Walking back to his palace, he felt the scar over his chest and winced. Still fresh, he groaned. But the conflicts have escalated and he needed to get ready, for he sensed that they were all reaching a point of no return. Either we die or the enemy does. No matter what, whoever did this to me and whoever had the gall to mistreat my aunt will know what real power is.

But sensing something above, he went out into the courtyard, squinted his eyes, and saw a tiny black shape flying in the sky. Its wings flapped like Meleys, but he could feel a powerful bond with this one. That’s when he knew. Drogon?

Good to finally meet you, he heard the black dragon say to him.
Aye, you too. And Meleys gave a roar to the sky, also seeing Drogon, but they all knew that now wasn’t the time yet.

Meanwhile, Jon could sense something else between Meleys and Drogon. It was similar to what he had with Daenerys. *If that’s the case, better be more dragon eggs then,* he mused.

Joon hotfooted to the Ministry of Justice, angered at the letter he received from one of his acquaintances in Asabhad. Others might have assumed that he was going to protect his career or to safeguard his holdings around Kushiro, but all that was occupying his mind was the safety of his son and captain of his guards. *I swear to the gods that the minister will not be spared from what I have to say to him!*

His acquaintance, the provost-general of the Southwest Imperial Army, informed that his son Seong and Hoon Ti were arrested for aiding and abetting the enemy. Joon was initially as to what enemy he was referring to, but the letter said that they were helping Daenerys Targaryen, Queen of Meereen and responsible for the deaths of their merchants in Slavers Bay. He crumpled in anger, both at his son’s carelessness and the fact that another Targaryen was in the empire. *Seong, I taught you to be better than this. What happened?*

All of court had heard of forces loyal to Queen Daenerys sinking their merchant ships on suspicion of them carrying weapons, prompting the emperor and the prime minister to add her name on the list of enemies to the empire. And inevitably, her alleged actions had caused some damage to Daeron’s reputation in the capital, as both of them were Targaryens. However, Daeron’s death and resurrection had managed to distract the officials from any weak association he had with Daenerys, with many praising the event as a sign from the gods. *The situation is getting more and more complicated,* Joon groaned.

But for now, he had to make sure that his son and captain were released from military custody immediately. Besides his protecting his son, he had a legal basis for doing so. After consulting the matter with the inspector-general of the entire imperial army, he realized that using army troops to arrest someone like Daenerys was a violation of the jurisdiction, as the army was solely focused on defense and war while the arrest of the three of them in Asabhad should have been handled by the local constables. Joon made sure to have the inspector-general inform Minister Zong of this, as he had the power to punish the Captain-General of Southwest Imperial Army for this breach and put more pressure on whoever had the gall to go after Seong.

Ignoring the guards and various assistants protesting Joon as he pushed his way towards the Minister of Justice’s quarters, he barged in and saw the minister having a drink with a few of his subordinates. All of them were surprised and angered at his appearance.

“What do you want, Lord Joon?” the minister was indignant.

“Release my son at once!” He had no more patience.

Seeing that the situation had already escalated, the minister dismissed his subordinates and them close the door. “Please sit down, my lord.”

“No,” Joon snapped.

The minister sat behind his desk. “There is nothing that I can do, my lord. Your son and Captain Ti have been arraigned and they are both expected to appear before a judge for their crimes.”

“You’re doing this without a proper investigation?” Joon was aware of how the proceedings were
like, and the minister was bypassing several steps.

“This is an unprecedented situation, my lord,” the minister leaned backwards against the screen wall. “Daenerys Targaryen is in our lands and given that she was declared an enemy to the empire, anyone who helped her must be punished.”

Joon knew that the minister didn’t care about that. “Who put you up to this? Was it the prime minister?”

“Careful, my lord,” the minister warned. “As your son is of the nobility, I have him comfortably quartered. But if you try to go against me, I can make his situation very difficult.”

That only made Joon angrier. “So, it was the prime minister that ordered you to rush this. Did he have the Southwest Army involved also?”

“Arresting a dragon rider such as Daenerys Targaryen is beyond the capabilities of local constables,” the minister answered. “After consulting the matter with the Captain-General, he recommended sending in a battalion to arrest them all.”

Joon now realized how ridiculous this was sounding. “If he sent in a battalion of provosts, I would have understood. But combat troops? Not only did you facilitate a breach in jurisdiction, you basically showed everyone with eyes to see and a mind to think that you were willing to have soldiers policing the population. No one is going to stand still for this.”

“What’s your point, my lord?”

Joon pulled out a slip and slammed it on his table. “This is a letter from the army inspector-general, also having the seals of Minister Zong and Prince Kaijin. They’re ordering you to release my son and Captain Ti immediately, as your collusion with the Southwest Army is a clear violation of authority. And they will investigate the Captain-General for misconduct.”

The minister scoffed. “They can’t order me to do anything. This is the Ministry of Justice, which is beyond their jurisdiction, as you so imply.”

“Get them released, or you will see what I can do for my family. You have no idea who I can call on for help and just how difficult I can make your life.”

The minister grabbed the slip, stared back at Lord Joon, and then duly ripped it. “Do your worst, Lord Joon. Unless you are willing to commit violent acts against me, your son and captain will remain where they are. See your way out.”

But Joon would have the final say, as he grabbed another table and flipped it in anger. “All right, then. If that’s the way you want it, if you want to continue sucking from the prime minister.”

His attempt to free his son and captain failed, he stormed over to the prison, where he was granted special access by Lord Buko. He went over to his son’s cell, where they reached through the wooden bars.

“Father!” Seong cried out in relief.

“My son,” Joon held back his tears of joy. “I’m so glad you are alive.”

“I’m doing all right, father,” Seong answered.

Joon turned around and saw Hoon seated with his legs crossed, calm as ever. “How are you,
“One of the benefits of a lack of sight is that I don’t see where I am. I am still in my mind,” Hoon replied.

Joon nodded in response. “I see. I tried getting the both of you out of here the right way.”

“What happened?” Seong asked.

“It’s the Minister of Justice. He’s not going to release the both of you, despite the fact that he did so by violating the process.”

Seong paled. “What will happen now?”

“I don’t know,” Joon answered honestly. “I’m still trying to get you both out before you sit before a judge. And given the prime minister’s reach, he might have already tainted whatever trial you will appear in.”

“Why he’s doing this?” Seong didn’t quite understand how things were yet.

“We might have helped Daeron Targaryen, but he made so many powerful enemies, especially those that are under the prime minister,” Joon stated. “He’s trying to get back at him and with him dead, he sees an opening to go after anyone who helped him.”

“But father, I heard that he’s been resurrected. Is this true?” Joon nodded slowly. “How is that even possible?”

“I don’t understand the situation myself,” Joon admitted. “But regardless, his death and now resurrection has really shaken things up. Everyone at court are eyeing each other with suspicion, asking themselves who was involved. And now, there are rumors spreading that the gang leader Wah, who actually did the deed, was connected with someone very high up at court. And it’s not just one person.”

Seong gulped at the implications. “What’s the plan now, father?”

“I’m still working on it,” Joon squeezed his son’s arm. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, both of you,” he turned around to Hoon, who smiled. “You trust me?” Seong bobbed his head. “All right. I’ll be back soon. Until then, don’t cause conflicts or anything of that nature. Just sit tight.”

“I’ll make sure he won’t do anything rash, my lord,” Hoon Ti promised.

Joon then found himself in Lord Buko’s quarters, as he was the one responsible for everything in the capital garrison, including the army prison. “You’re frustrated. You’re angry. I understand that,” Lord Buko began with.

“I don’t have time for your politics or for whatever ideas you have,” Joon brushed off. “Tell me why you wanted to see me.”

“You want to help your son, like any other father. But you can’t do anything, not alone and not while you face powerful people like the Minister of Justice and the Prime Minister himself.”

“What are you proposing?”

“Everyone could see that tensions are at an all-time high here, and all it takes is someone doing
something rash for everything to explode. We can’t control how big the explosion will be, but we can take measures in ensuring that we do not get injured from the blast.”

“We?” Joon crossed his arms.

“I have made an alliance with Princess Khiara, who shares my distrust of the Prime Minister and his ilk. But even between the both of us, we don’t have enough to overcome them. Whereas you…”

At another time, Joon would have outright refused. However, given that he had few options left, he listened. “You want me on your side?”

“You are a man of influence in the northern provinces, Lord Joon, an area that has not been tainted by the Prime Minister. If you join us, the northern armies will follow and that’s what we need to fight the Prime Minister should it come to that.”

“You’re willing to risk a civil war just to fight him?” Joon had to hide how horrified he was.

“The rot has been growing for decades and we are long overdue for measures that can eliminate it,” Lord Buko stated. “And the situation has never been more precarious, especially with Prince Sumeng under the Prime Minister’s thumb and everyone slowly understanding just who this Wah character was connected with.”

Joon shook his head, but he had to save his son. “What does the Princess want me to do, if I do agree?”

“If you do agree, ride back to your headquarters in the Northwest Province. Make sure that the northern generals will follow your orders and that all of their troops will obey your commands. Eliminate anyone who would challenge us.”

“And what about Lord Stark?” Joon knew that Jon’s uncle will do anything to safeguard his family, just like he was.

“We’ll talk to him soon, but it won’t be hard to persuade him. As the commander of the closest and largest army near the capital, he would be instrumental in our plans.”

“And what exactly are the plans concocted by Her Highness?” Joon asked.

“I cannot tell you that, unless you join us.”

Joon sighed in frustration, but as he had little choice and his son’s life was at stake, he swallowed his doubt and distrust of the princess. “Tell Her Highness if that she can save my son, I will support her.”

After walking out of Lord Buko’s headquarters, Joon was in shock, but he had to appreciate the ingenuity of what Princess Khiara had in mind. At the same time, he sensed that Lord Buko was a convenience for her, an alliance made to eliminate their common enemy, and would thus be discarded once he served his purpose. That better be the case, or Lord Buko will become a threat against our empire, Joon thought. He might have disliked the Prime Minister, but he was strongly against Lord Buko’s idea of an empire ruled by the generals. For now, he would tolerate him, for he had to save his son. Please, let this work.

Benjen took Mingyu to a place in the capital that served the best pork broth that he had. It was a place frequented by many officials and army and navy officers, with the owner himself an army man before he used the final pay gained from his twenty years of service to open one of the most
successful businesses in Yin. And because Benjen was a general, he was placed on a special list and accorded a table on the second floor, which afforded more privacy than on the first.

Benjen was more than happy that his nephew was alive, and he could rejoice for his late sister’s sake. However, like everyone else in the capital, he was disturbed by how he came back to life, even more so when it wasn’t just a regular shadow man involved. The way he talked, the way he moved, and how he resurrected Jon was bordering the supernatural, as if he had lived a long time and had seen everything.

But then, that shadow man, Ardroon, then talked to him about Brandon the Builder, his ancestor. “How do you know him?” Benjen narrowed his eyes.

“I knew him very well,” Ardroon replied, or whatever was inside of him. “A white man who helped end the Long Night, giving the one who was promised what was needed to end the Long Night. You’ll soon understand that the Long Night is not something that is limited to just your lands. It is a phenomenon that had occurred across the world and only by their skin of their teeth did man push the evil back.”

Benjen was stunned. What’s more, he couldn’t disbelieve it, not after what he had seen. “But Brandon the Builder lived thousands of years ago.”

“And I was there long before he came to this world,” Ardoon answered, or whatever was inside of him. “For all of his talents and prowess, he was still a man and therefore could not live forever. Although, I must admit that his line certainly outlasted many others that I have seen from the beginning of time.”

Benjen was getting more confused. “Why are you talking like you lived longer than my ancestor? You some spirit or something like that?”

“I was one of the agents of creation when the world first came into being,” Ardroon revealed. “I wasn’t a supreme deity, but I occupied the middle part between those who controlled everything and you mere mortals. Whatever the gods commanded, I had to obey. I was also part of their first line of defense when the Long Night occurred, which really was a cosmic struggle beyond your comprehension. You believe that you’ve seen death, evil, the darkest incarnations? Oh, no. No mortal can understand just how… serious the conflicts in the divine world was.”

Benjen expressed his disinterest. “And I don’t intend to understand, for I don’t concern myself with matters that do not directly involve me.”

“I thought so,” Ardroon smirked.

“But if you think us as lowly beings, why did you save my nephew?” Benjen asked.

“I can tell that much has changed since the end of the Long Night,” Ardroon said. “I remember when this capital was really just a swamp dotted with small fishing villages, only to grow into a great city. And people have long dismissed the Long Night as a myth, which was expected. But then… the red comet came and that’s when I knew that something was growing in the frozen parts of this world. And the one whose body I now occupy made a strong case for your nephew.”

“You think that he’s the one to end the Long Night?”

Ardroon, or the spirit, laughed derisively. “You’ve got to be jesting with me. Since when do the heroes of any story have to be men? Why not both?”

Benjen was surprised. “There are others?”
“It’ll be too much to say for this moment, so I will leave it at that. But just know that we all have our parts to play, so you should be careful to not jeopardize what you can do.”

“Is something the matter?” Mingyu asked, seeing Benjen in deep thought.

“Oh, no,” Benjen shook off and put on a smile. “Just glad that my nephew is alive.”

“It’s quite something, as no one comes back from the dead like that,” Mingyu answered. “How did he come back to life?”

“I am not sure if you’ll believe me,” Benjen told her.

“I have seen many things,” Mingyu drank her tea. “Believe me, if there is one who is able to believe in the most outrageous events imaginable, that’s me.”

Benjen told her about the power the spirit residing in Ardroon had, which involved fire and smoke as well as closing his eyes and running his fingers over Jon’s head. To her credit, Mingyu didn’t look afraid and instead listened intently.

“If only others knew that such power still existed in this world,” Mingyu noted. “I guess we are insignificant in the larger scheme of things.”

“Oh, you’re not the first person to tell me that. Whoever is inside that shadow man lived for thousands of years, so of course that spirit would think of us as nothing compared to what he had seen.”

“Makes me wonder if living for too long can be a curse as well as having a short life,” Mingyu said. “Granted, that spirit is not of this world and therefore has no reason to care for us, but why did he stay if he doesn’t like us? Unless of course, he had no choice in the matter and thus had to stay here because something was preventing him from leaving.”

*A deity who cannot leave this world… how interesting.* But Benjen was not going to concern himself with the spiritual despite believing in the Old Gods and thus decided to spend the rest of his time enjoying a nice steaming pot of pork broth with Mingyu.

By this point, their bond had grown past physical desire and became something deeper. After she shared that she was on the run from someone, Benjen instinctively decided to protect her, as he didn’t want to lose the one woman who he had grown fond of. He didn’t know if it was love he felt for Mingyu, but what he felt to her… he didn’t feel with anyone else before.

They spent the next hour talking enjoying their dinner, talking and laughing with each other over nonsensical stuff, things that Benjen never imagined himself talking about. He was a hardened man especially after his mother and Lyanna died, but Mingyu brought back the sides of his character that he didn’t know were still there. He could still laugh at small talk and he could simply enjoy the time he had with his woman. *My woman…* Benjen liked that thought. *If father or Ned saw me now, they would have thrown a fit,* he mused.

But as Benjen poured Mingyu another cup of tea, he noticed her expression had suddenly turned serious. One moment, they were grinning and chuckling with each other, but it was that look that alarmed him. He wore that look himself many times when he ranged beyond the Wall, and that was when he sensed danger.

“You all right?” Benjen tried to ask.

“Get down!” Mingyu grabbed Benjen and shoved them under their table, just as crossbow bolts
pierced the wood. Those nearby were alarmed at arrows appearing where they ate and thus ran and screamed.

“What’s happening?” Benjen was shocked at how quick it happened. But any answers he sought would have to wait, as he saw through the open railings half a dozen man wearing straw hats and armed with swords.

“Stay here. I’ll take care of them,” Mingyu was about to leave him, but Benjen grabbed her.

“What do you mean take care of them? What’s going on here?”

Mingyu pulled him in for a kiss. “Don’t let yourself be hurt. I’ll be right back,” she said before jumping above the railings and landing on the floor below. The six assassins, which Benjen could clearly see from how they carried themselves, surrounded Mingyu. *Why did I leave my sword and my tanegashima back at Jon’s palace?* Benjen cursed himself for not preparing for every eventuality, as he had grown complacent.

“What are you doing?” he heard one of the assassins ask Mingyu. “Why are you protecting him?”

“What? Shocked was inadequate to describe his thoughts at the moment.

“Our clients gave you plenty of time to take care of him, but you wasted it. And now, situation has changed for the worst and we can see that you’ve grown soft.”

*What is going on here?*

“The clients have paid us triple our rate to kill you also for trying their patience,” another assassin spoke up. “Not that we needed it, since you have become a liability after all we’ve done for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mingyu shot back. “You were only a means to an end, and I was able to survive. But now I see that despite your claims on family, it’s all a lie.”

Another assassin sighed in regret. “I’m sorry it had to be this way, Mingyu. We truly are.”

*How did they know her name?*

“I’m sorry too,” Mingyu stated before he heard her cracking something in her hands and white dust released from them as she spun around.

In an instant, the ground floor was blanketed with thick white dust, obscuring Benjen’s vision. But he could hear the metal clanging, the grunts of pain, and the flesh cutting. Without thinking, he ran down the stairs and into the dust, which he discovered to be painful to his eyes.

Struggling to see, he stumbled upon the corpse of an assassin and picked up his sword. He soon found Mingyu fighting off four other assassins, using only what looked like a necklace. But upon closer look, he saw that she was using her necklace to parry the sword strikes and even disarm one assassin by grabbing his blade, twisting it so that it touched his neck, and pulling so that it cut it. She then used both of her hands to grab the necklace, swirling the necklace around another’s neck and then snapping it, releasing a sickening sound. She then kicked the other two assassins to the ground by jumping and pushing against their chest.

Another assassin saw Benjen and attacked, with him barely parrying his strikes from the speed. Knowing that this man probably had more endurance than he did, Benjen found an opening after
he parried the man’s sword again and headbutting him. Seeing that he was stunned, he grabbed his legs and slammed him against the floor. Reaching for a teapot, he tried to smash it against his face, but the assassin grabbed his hand and kneed him in the balls. Screaming in pain, he was forced on his back and struggled as the assassin pulled out a knife tried to stab him in the heart.

“Die!” he shouted. Seeing Benjen was stronger than he looked, the assassin pushed against the tip of the dagger, causing it to pierce the skin and him to grunt. But before the assassin could kill him, Mingyu’s necklace wrapped around his neck as she pulled him off of Benjen. Seeing his opening, he grabbed the sword and ran him through while Mingyu snapped his neck.

Surveying the carnage around them, both of them knew that Mingyu had to answer for what was happening, as it was clear that she lied to Benjen. Many feelings of betrayal and shock flashed through his mind and struck at his heart, since the assassins clearly knew Mingyu and that they were targeting the both of them.

“I thought you were just a singer,” Benjen could only say.

“I am a singer. It’s just one of the things I’m good at.”

Benjen stomped over to her, stopping just inches away. “What else have you been hiding from me?”

Mingyu sighed, shaking her head at herself. “I had to do what I did to survive. And that meant killing people for money.”

“But that’s not all,” Benjen wasn’t convinced. “Did you pursue me as an act of cruelty, to string me along before you killed me like a pig to slaughter?”

“Please, listen to me,” Mingyu tried to hold Benjen, but he stepped back. He had to hold back his tears at the truth of who the woman he had grown fond of really was, a killer who was preparing him to be killed in the cruelest manner possible. The feelings of pain that he felt when Lyanna died was nothing compared to betrayal, and he didn’t know if he could stand up again and trust anyone outside of family. “If I really wanted to kill you, I would have let you die. At least give me that.”

Seeing that she had a point, he grabbed her hand hard. “When we come back to our house, tell me everything. No more secrets.”

Robb was escorted to the Red Temple in Volantis by the Yi-Tish priestess, where he would meet Kinvara. If he had to be honest with himself, he was nervous about meeting the highest-ranked member of the red faith, especially after seeing how persuasive the red priestesses and priests were regarding the enslaved population. They’re either great liars, or something else is driving them forwards, Robb thought.

The former King in the North was busy with the Company of the Rose and working with Jaenyra Vhassar. Besides signing a contract to gain their services, Robb had to find the Wolf Pack, who happened to be operating in Qohor. Sending a message to gain their services, the captain-general of the Wolf Pack replied that he would accept his offer, but he would have to wait until he could transport his men down the Qhoyne and into the Rhoyne, a journey that would take several weeks. Waiting more weeks... no problem, Robb thought dryly.

The Vhassar lady proved to be very helpful to them all, as she was very connected with influential people in Volantis who were also looking to elevate themselves at the expense of the “Old Blood.” These included people who had their opportunities blocked because those of the “Old Blood”
refused to allow them a say in governance and also to benefit from trade. “If you make people feel that they cannot do anything with the current situation, they’ll do everything they can to either exploit it or overturn it,” Jaenyra said.

That made Robb think of his own situation while in the North. House Stark ruling established a balance of power that ensure that peace existed in the northern kingdom, while no other houses attempted to challenge them. However, he stopped himself when that line of thought inevitably led to a sympathetic view of House Bolton’s actions. *It’s not like Lord Roose was enslaved or didn’t have the opportunity to make something of himself. He was a very powerful man under me, and then he exploited my moment of weakness to supplant me.*

Still, Robb was learning much about himself and also how to better navigate the ever-treacherous world occupied by those with power. He also realized that loyalty and strength might have been useful to a point, but he had to be shrewd and very careful whenever he dealt with his subordinates. He had to act like Cregan Stark, who was able to make a good mark on the Seven Kingdoms in less than an hour and was able to positively influence the immediate outcome of the Dance of the Dragons. *And he was not that much older than me. If he could do it, I can too.*

Robb was aware that he was being followed by those affiliated with Malaquo, but the reason that they didn’t close in was because any attack on a red faith messenger would result in dire consequences from the enslaved. As much as they thought they were in control, the slave owners were also rightfully afraid of the slaves, since they did tasks that not even freedmen would do and were subjected to brutal methods. And someone in chains could only tolerate so much before they snapped. After seeing everything about slavery so far, Robb decided that he would not help a slave-master if he or she was begging to be saved from a throng of slaves who broke their chains. *They should have thought better if or when it comes to that.*

They finally arrived at the red temple, with Robb and Grey Wind bathed in the dimness of the holy place, which was broken only by the flames that were inside. “This way,” the Yi-Tish priestess urged them to follow. Glancing at his direwolf, who sensed Robb’s apprehension, both still pressed onward.

Finally, they arrived at a sanctum, where Robb saw who he assumed was Kinvara, who was looking intently at a flame. She looked quite young for someone who possessed a high position in the red faith and judging from her necklace, Robb assumed that she was from Asshai, based on what Maester Luwin had instructed.

“A shadow woman… what spells does she know?”

“Good to make your acquaintance, Robb Stark,” Kinvara addressed him while not turning around. “And I can feel that strong bond between you and your wolf creature.”

“I presume you are Kinvara?”

“You are speaking to the High Priestess of the Red Temple of Volantis, the Flame of Truth, the Light of Wisdom, and the First Servant of the Lord of Light. You will address her accordingly,” the Yi-Tish priestess scolded.

“There, there,” Kinvara finally turned around to see Robb. “He does not practice our faith, so he will be excused from any deviation of decorum.”

“I thank you… Your Holiness,” Robb came up with.

Kinvara chuckled in amusement. “I am not your High Septon. We do have authority over other priestesses, but we do not emphasize a hierarchy here. We worship like you do to your Old Gods, in a way. But enough of religious discussions. I invited you here because I believe it’s time you
know your role in the coming struggle.”

“Let me guess. The Long Night?” Robb was still skeptical but considering what he had heard and seen so far, he was not ready to completely deny it.

“It’s a threat that the entire world will have to face, not just a race of ice men conjuring up the dead. It’s a struggle that has been in the making for thousands of years and your White Walkers are merely manifestations of the greater conflict.”

Robb was not understanding. “How could the white walkers be as insignificant as you claim?”

“I didn’t say insignificant,” Kinvara corrected him. “Something lurks on the top of this world, with the ice masking what has been brewing ever since the Lightbringer forced them back. Your wall of ice is not the only barrier to protect against this great evil, for in the east, there is a wall made by forts of black stone built for the same purpose. And no one was able to know where the evil grew, for no one ever thought to think of checking the top.”

Robb had to admit that was true from all of his lessons regarding landscape. “Are you saying that the Lands of Always Winter are somehow connected to this continent?”

“We all live in the same world, Robb Stark. And while we have different versions of the great evil, we all speak of the same thing, just not with the same details.”

“And what is my purpose in this struggle?”

“I saw in the flames the final form of the ones who were promised. The reason why it was never clear on whether it was a man or a woman was because the word never meant to separate the two. Only together could the Lightbringer be completed and drive back the evil once and for all. Daenerys Targaryen is part of that final form, but she cannot fulfill her role without your help.”

“My help?” Robb was surprised.

“You already have resources at your disposal. A powerful supporter, men to fight for you, and money among others. And the one place that needs all of that is where Daenerys truly began her reign as a powerful leader.”

“Meereen,” Robb concluded.

“You must find a way to reach Meereen and help her supporters there from succumbing to the pressure that they face from both the grandmasters and the tigers. Meereen could hold out compared to Yunkai and Astapor, but they will not last forever. With you helping them, they’ll have a chance,” Kinvara explained.

Robb felt there was more. “That’s it? I have to help Daenerys Targaryen hold Meereen?”

“And once you see her again, along with the other parts of the Lightbringer, you will be at the forefront of the struggle against the great evil,” Kinvara continued. “You will help command the armies that will put the dragons back to their rightful place and then help them against the ultimate enemy, the form of true evil. Ice must temper fire, and you shall greatly assist in that.”

Robb was still not understanding, but he nodded. “I see…”

“I can tell that you are still very hesitant, so let me say this. Your brother’s name was Jon, right? The oldest of them?” Robb nodded, still remembering that was what he really was despite everything and thankful that Kinvara made sure to point that out. “You and your brother built a
great mountain of snow above a gate when you were boys. Now, I’m not going to comment what boys did, but that showed you two were very close.”

“We still are,” Robb reminded her.

“Anyways,” Kinvara moved on. “Both of you were spotted by a brother of your Night’s Watch, the one they call Mance Rayder and is now the King Beyond the Wall.” Robb vaguely remembered that man, although he had long forgotten his name. ‘Both he and the one before the current Lord Commander of your Night’s Watch had visited Winterfell to discuss business with your late father. When Mance saw what you to had done, he promised not to tell on you two, for he knew that you were boys.” Robb was getting uncomfortable with how much she knew. “I don’t know exactly what happened, whether it was by mistake or you two were getting bored, but the both of you dumped the snow on the slowest of Eddard Stark’s guards, the one they call Fat Tom, and he chased you around the yard without caring who you were because you greatly annoyed him.”

Robb smiled at that memory, for it was the start of when he became really close with Jon. “Only a few people outside of Winterfell know that story.”

“The Lord of Light revealed much to me in the hopes that you will go forward towards your true purpose.”

Robb sighed before nodding, his doubts largely wiped away. “All right. I am still not believing what you believe, but you went through such lengths to show your trustworthiness. It’s only right that I respond by giving you my trust.”

“Excellent,” Kinvara smiled. “And worry not. While you move towards Meereen with your sellswords, we shall protect Jaenrya Vhassar and begin planning for the inevitable uprising against the Old Blood, both the tigers and the elephants. It’s time that the chains are broken and the enslaved take the freedom that is their right.”

Robb dipped his head before being escorted out by the Yi-Tish priestess. “How do you intend to move from here to Meereen? It’s going to be difficult to reach the city with the situation there.”

“I might have to consider taking the demon road or going by ship,” Robb thought aloud. “However, going by land would take too long and put within striking range of the Dothraki horse lords while it’ll be hard to punch through the blockade there.”

“I should point out that while Yunkai and Astapor have fallen, it’ll take some time for them to march on Meereen. After all, the tigers, the grandmasters, and even the Golden Company need to consolidate their forces before moving on the prize.”

Robb had heard tell of the Golden Company, led by someone claiming to be Aegon, son of Rhaegar and Elia, and his sister Rhaenys. However, he wasn’t going to waste his time with rumors yet, since he had to reach Meereen.

“As soon as the Wolf Pack agrees to work for me, I will set for the city. The more I think about it, the more the demon road might not be an attractive option, especially with cities like Mantarys and Tollos connected to it.”

“Wise decision. And it’ll take over a moon to reach Meereen by land, and it might be too late then.”

As they returned to Jaenrya’s manse, Robb laid back on the bed, with Grey Wind joining him there. Scratching his back and keeping Ice close, he slowly drifted into sleep, but he now had a
clearer idea on what he was to do. *Father, mother, please help me get through this. So many things might happen, but I am applying the lessons that I should have learned earlier. I hope that I don’t mess up again,* Robb thought.

Margaery was not above the feeling that came with humiliation. No matter how much she tried to remove her emotions from the snake pit that was the Red Keep, she seriously started to think that being a queen wasn’t worth it, especially when her marriage to Joffrey was nonexistent in all but name. That was what went through her mind when she saw another whore exit Joffrey’s chambers, which she hadn’t occupied since the first night of their wedding.

Glaring at the whore, who was wise to run away upon seeing the queen, she stormed into Joffrey’s chambers, ignoring the fact that he was naked and sipping a goblet of wine. It certainly helped her that the blonde shit was becoming just like his father, his skinny form slowly being replaced with a large belly and his arms and legs started to have an excess of fat. *Now I have absolutely no reason to bed him and bear his heirs,* Margaery thought as her actions were now being vindicated.

“What do you want, wife?” Joffrey pulled a leg from the cold chicken plate next to his bed and started to chew on it.

Margaery sighed. “At the very least, be quiet about when you fuck with your whores, or if that’s too much, show up at the small council meetings.”

Joffrey threw the goblet at her, but she narrowly missed it as it smashed against the wall. “You do not tell me what to do, you bitch!” he barked.

But the rose of Highgarden was not impressed. “Bitch? Well then, I might as well call you a pig. Oh wait, I should call you the second coming of Aegon the Unworthy, given how he couldn’t keep his cock in his pants like yourself.”

Joffrey shot up from the bed, intending to strike her for that insult. But he forgot that he left a cold and rotten piece of auroch steak on the floor next to him, causing him to slip and his growing body to jingle from the fall. Margaery didn’t even try to stop giggling, for it added to how pathetic the blonde shit was.

“Oh, my goodness. All your talk of ‘I am the king’ never held any weight, and now I have clear evidence on why that is. At least Aegon the Unworthy was a handsome and well-built man in his youth, whereas you were none of that right now. But the only reason why you are still on a throne is because Tommen is dead and you dying would only cause more problems.” Seeing another jug of wine near her, she grabbed the handle and walked over to Joffrey. “Have a drink, Your Grace, and enjoy it,” she said before pouring all of its content. The only he could do is groan as he couldn’t even bring himself up.

“Joffrey!” Margaery turned around and saw Cersei run past her, push her away, and help him up. “My king, are you all right?” she grabbed a rag and wiped the wine from his face as best as he could. Seeing Joffrey glare at Margaery, it didn’t take long for Cersei to become angry at her. “What did you do?”

“You hated Robert Baratheon so much, and now your son is just like his father. Shouldn’t you be grateful that he takes after one of his parents?”

Cersei shot up from the floor, very pissed. “You better watch your tongue. That is your king you’re talking about.”
“And you are speaking to the actual queen of these Seven Kingdoms,” Margaery was going to pull rank since Cersei did it first. “Mind how you direct your threats, Queen Mother.”

“You will get your comeuppance for this. I swear to you, just as I swear to kill my Imp brother for killing Tommen,” Cersei hissed.

Margaery just turned around and walked away, not in the mood to enter a pointless exchange of words with the fanatically devoted mother of the blonde shit. *The only reason why she’s still here in the first place is because of Lord Tywin, but even he’s not going to live forever. Once he passes away, no one can protect her,* she thought.

Making her way to her grandmother, who was still walking through the gardens of the Red Keep, she grasped her arm. “Your hands smell of wine,” the thorn of House Tyrell noted.

“Let’s just say that I had to give our king something that he needed at the moment,” Margaery said dryly.

“Didn’t know that you were developing a sense of humor,” Olenna replied back, amused. “Reminds of myself in my earlier years.”

“I do what I can, grandmother. But nowadays, the crown on my head is not worth the price we paid for now,” Margaery didn’t care anymore about her status.

“I can understand that,” Olenna answered empathetically. “But the thing about power, one of its benefits, is the time that it allows us. No one can live forever, but we can have enough time to make our mark on the world around us. And while we wanted someone of Tyrell blood to be on the throne, it also brought us time, as our chances of fighting a three-way war against the Lannisters and the Starks wouldn’t have been very good, and our position would have been precarious. Now, we had plenty of time to plan, strengthen our position in the Seven Kingdoms, and seek alternate options.”

“And what are these alternate options you speak of?” Margaery asked inquisitively.

Olenna glanced around, careful that no one was close enough to listen. “I have received reports that Robb Stark is alive and well.”

Margaery’s eyes widened. “What?”

“My first reaction as well,” Olenna replied. “I don’t know how he survived the Red Wedding, but someone confirmed to me his survival and that he is now in Volantis gathering an army of sellswords.”

“To take back the North?” Margaery was not convinced of the viability of the plan, if that was the case.

“The person who I am friendly with, a Volantene trader who doesn’t like slavery, told me that Robb Stark has no aim to return to Westeros anytime soon.”

“How much does this trader know?”

“Enough to be able to run goods between the neutral factions in Volantis and those currently engaged in the Slaver’s Bay against Daenerys Targaryen. That trader told Willas, who in turn told me about him and what he knew.”

“So that’s how you knew that Prince Quentyn was currently with the ones called Aegon and
“He’s invisible enough,” Olenna answered. “But Robb’s survival might work in our favor. We could reveal his survival to the Lannisters, who in turn will retaliate against both the Freys and Roose Bolton for their failure. We can also hide this and make our plans to influence events for the North while also obtaining leverage. After all, the northmen might rally around Robb Stark again after what the Boltons have done and their inability to hold back the wildlings.”

Margaery nodded, going through everything. “And what about these Targaryens? Daenerys Targaryen is nowhere to be found, Daeron Targaryen is beyond our reach, and we don’t about the other two.”

“Unless we have the second incarnation of the Dance of the Dragons, I am sure that the Targaryen problem will sort itself out. After all, if they do return, we can easily use our history of fighting with the Mad King to claim our continuing loyalty to them,” Olenna shrugged.

Margaery then heard the guards shouting and running about, all going towards the courtyard. Glancing at her grandmother, she walked with her and followed the guards out of the gate and onto the causeway. There, they found a huge crowd shouting all sorts of obscenities at the Red Keep, mostly against Joffrey. “What’s happening here?”

“You see the men with the Star on their heads?” Olenna pointed them out to Margaery. “They belong to the Sparrows, those affiliated with the one they call the High Sparrow. Never had I seen a more fanatical bunch before them.”

“Why are they here?”

“Because I selectively revealed to them Joffrey’s dalliances through intermediaries, and how it was his fault that this bloody war against Stannis has not ended after so long.”

Margaery blinked, surprised that she took that risk. “The people might be starving, but using fanatics poses a risk. There’s no telling what they can do.”

“True,” Olenna admitted. “But we should put our own pressure on the Lannisters, making Lord Tywin more pliable. Even he knows that he cannot hope to rule with an angry mob threatening him.”

Margaery was not sure about that strategy, but she trusted her grandmother. “What happens when Lord Tywin finds out that you were behind this?”

“Either he has to cooperate with us on a more equal footing, or we will have to put more pressure, starting with Cersei. But that’s only in extreme cases.”

“You do remember that Tywin wiped out the Tarbecks and Reynes for what they did?”

“And that’s why we have alternate plans,” Olenna said pointedly. “Should Tywin decide to pull the same thing he did at Castamere on us, we will respond in kind. But he needs us very much at the moment, so he has to answer our demands.”

Margaery stared at the crowd, all of them crazed and the goldcloaks and guards being the only ones to stop them from charging towards the Red Keep. Joffrey and the Lannisters were only delaying the inevitable and the realm were suffering under his rule, even though his grandfather was barely keeping it together. As she thought of Robb Stark’s survival and the Targaryens, she became more apprehensive of what the future lay in store for herself and her family. So much insanity... why did we even bother in the first place?
Daenerys shuddered in the dark and damp cell of the prison. She was still in her thin robes and the stone was cold while she could the screams of the insane and broken in the other cells near her.

Her companions Lord Seong Kitara and Hoon Ti were taken to another prison, as whoever was in charge was afraid that they would plot something if they incarcerated together. The governor of her prison told her that she was an enemy of the empire and so, she was not accorded the honor and privileges of a ruler.

Why are they doing this? She couldn’t wrap her mind around why they were treating her like this. Unless they had a purpose behind throwing in a dark cell, which might have been to throw her off mentally and make more susceptible to whatever games they wanted to play with her. There’s no other reason why whoever’s doing this would throw away such courtesy.

But Daenerys had to prepare herself, for she had to stand tall for her trial and be ready to face whoever wanted to harm her and her nephew with eyes of steel.

And that was what got her through her present predicament, the chance to finally see her nephew face-to-face. I told you that we will meet, she reached out to Daeron.

Suddenly, the doors to her cell opened and she was dragged out by the guards, with the prison governor himself escorting her. “Your Majesty, you will now be taken to the Phoenix Palace, where you will be tried before the court for the charges of murder and violation of neutrality.” She said nothing as she was finally taken out of the prison and into the city outside.

Crowds lined the streets where she walked, all of them silent but she could see the mixture of indifference and loathing amongst them. She learned long ago to not care for what others thought, but this was a sharp difference from when she ruled over populations of freedmen. All she wished at the moment was for steel cuffs to be removed from her wrists and hands. One would think that someone like myself would deserve to look proper and not like a common criminal.

Eventually, they came upon what appeared to be the Phoenix Palace, which was not as tall as the Great Pyramid in Meereen but looked more spread out than her seat of power in the Slaver’s Bay. And all of the guards were heavily armed and dressed in ceremonial attire from what she can guess. Must be a great day today, she thought with some dryness.

They then reached the main pavilion, which housed the court. Entering through the screen doors, she was surprised to see dozens of who appeared to be court officials looking at her as they stood straight. All of them wore robes like hers and had black hats over their heads. But she then looked straight at a golden throne with a phoenix outstretched on the back, which sat a plump man with tanned skin. From the way he sat, she knew that he was the ruler of this empire. The emperor himself. She also saw three younger men seated below the emperor, with the youngest of them higher than the other two, and a woman not much older than she was.

Looking to her side, she saw who she was looking for: Daeron, alive and well and still handsome as she saw him the last time. Many feelings of joy rushed through her, as she wanted to run to him and hug him, telling him that she was here and that she would never let anything happen to him. And she could see that he was just as happy, with a tear dropping from his eye, which she reciprocated. Daeron...

But alas, they couldn’t be do that yet, for she was still in chains and on trial for her life. Hearing more chains behind her, she saw Seong Kitara and Hoon Ti brought it before being forced on their knees. Looking near Daeron, she saw an older man wanting to go to Seong but couldn’t. Joon Kitara, she recognized.
The herald shouted something that caused everyone to snap straighter at attention. The woman stood up and came forward, someone high ranked in court from the looks of her and how she carried herself. She was also the tallest woman she had seen, which was matched by how gorgeous she looked. “Greetings, Your Majesty,” she spoke in the common tongue. “I am Princess Khiara Bu, daughter of His Augustness the Emperor, and I shall be interpreting for you. I have also studied High Valyrian and am familiar with the Volantene and Tyroshi variants. Which are you most comfortable with?”

“The common tongue is fine,” Daenerys answered.

“Very well,” Khiara nodded.

“Although I don’t know how to address you, Princess.”

“Your Highness will suffice, Your Majesty,” Khiara then shared a look with Daeron, who shifted uncomfortably. Immediately, Daenerys sensed that something was going on between them. Did he bed her?

“The charges laid against Seong Kitara, son of Joon Kitara, and Hoon Ti, captain of the Kushiro guards, are aiding and abetting the enemy,” Khiara translated for the Grand Secretary. “As for Daenerys Targaryen, Queen of Meereen, the charges against her are murder and violation of neutrality. The facts that have accompanied this case have been investigated and there is no doubt regarding the culpability of these criminals.”

The court officials murmured to each other, while Daenerys was shocked at how quick they were to judge.

“However, as these are extreme circumstances, with one ruler facing another, the emperor himself might grant mercy to the accused on one condition,” Khiara translated, leaving Daenerys worried. “Where is your dragon?”

She gulped. “I don’t know, Your Highness.”

“This court has received reports that your black dragon was seen at Kushiro and therefore, like Prince Daeron here,” Khiara pointed to him. “You are a dragon rider and thus a great security risk. One dragon is enough, but two?”

Daenerys gritted her teeth. “I am not going to tell you where my dragon is, because I don’t know what your empire is capable of and I am not going to risk my child.”

“Maybe you don’t understand, Your Majesty,” Khiara stated. “The charges against you, if found guilty, carry the death sentence. And since the emperor is sitting as judge, he has the power to immediately put you to death. But he also understands that the moment he does, your dragon will kill everyone here. However, he has no compunction against executing Seong Kitara and Hoon Ti, as they don’t have dragons.” Daenerys looked behind her, staring into both of their eyes. I can’t condemn them to die, but I can’t risk Drogon.

“However, the emperor has decided to grant you some time to consider your situation and to review more evidence. Therefore, he will not reach a judgement today.”

Daenerys sighed in relief, but she knew that it was only a delay from her sanctioned death. As she, Seong, and Hoon were led away, she looked back at Daeron, who she knew wanted to run to her but he couldn’t do that without risking himself and the others with him.

“I understand,” Daenerys mouthed to him. “Please be safe. We’ll see each other soon.”
Daeron nodded. “I know. Just sit tight. Soon, we’ll be able to be the family we couldn’t be,” he mouthed back.

With that, Daenerys was returned to her cell, but she had newfound purpose and she saw her nephew. *Now, how to get out of his cell without endangering others?* she pondered.

**Chapter End Notes**

I hope I delivered on all sections. Sansa is now about to move towards the North, adding more chaos to her home (who would benefit really?), Jon is going through the moments of being brought back to life, Joon is now forced to ally with Khiara, Robb getting more troops and guidance, and Margaery in King's Landing.

Now, onto the important parts: Jon and Daenerys finally meeting and Benjen discovering that his love is an assassin. The latter was bound to happen and thus cause a hit in their relationship, while the former was long-overdue but they still can't fully embrace, not while she is facing those charges. Nevertheless, Jon and Daenerys have finally seen each other in person and now their relationship can really get started.

Also, anyone noticed the connection between Meleys and Drogon? ;)

See you next time!

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