The Watchers

by northernlass49

Summary

As Jon hovers between life and death in the aftermath of his stabbing at the hands of Bowen Marsh and other members of the Night’s Watch, three people converge to care for him. As they watch over him during those initial crucial hours, confessions ensue and new relationships are forged.
“Bring him in here”, said the woman dressed in red, pushing open the door to the maester’s anteroom.

The two queen’s men grunted as they ducked down slightly and staggered through the narrow doorway, trying not to bump the injured man against the door frame.

“Gently, please”, she said as they laid him on the narrow cot. One of the men lowered the injured man’s arms to his sides while the other glanced with suspicion at Satin who stood frozen in the doorway. The queen’s man jerked a thumb at him and turned to Melisandre.

“What about him?” he asked. “Is he one of them?”

She shook her head.

“Leave him be”, she replied.

Satin had moved to a corner of the room and was keening softly. Melisandre pursed her lips in annoyance before turning back to the queen’s men.

“Please send your mistress my regards for your assistance and tell her that I am unavailable for the time being. I will update her when I have any news to pass on”, she said with a curt nod.

“Very good, milady”, said one of the guards. They both bowed briefly before turning on their heels and exiting the room, closing the door behind them.

“You”, she said as she turned to the weeping man. “Can you read?”

He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes and wiped the tears away.

“Some”, he replied hoarsely. He tugged at the hem of his jerkin as he straightened up and then composed his face.

“Very well”, she said as she strode over to the desk. She picked up a quill, dipped in the inkwell and scribbled a few words on a piece of parchment before presenting it the man.

“Take this list to my room. There you will find a collection of bottles filled with herbs arrayed on a shelf. Bring me back the bottles with these names on them” she said. “And be quick about it...his life may depend upon it”.

Satin nodded as he lined the list carefully into his fist. Then he crossed over to the door and yanked it open.

A distraught looking blonde woman was just raising her fist to knock on the door. He gave her a stricken look before brushing past her.

“What happened?” asked Val. “I heard the commotion outside”.

Her face fell when she recognized the man lying on the cot. She gripped the door frame and stared at the gaping wound on the side of his neck and the blood that had spread under his armpits, staining the white sheet beneath his body.

“Does he live?” she whispered, her eyes fixed on the Jon’s face.
Melisandre glanced up at her before placing two fingers on his neck. Then she leaned down to place an ear to his chest, watching it rise and fall as he took irregular shallow breaths.

“Barely”, she replied while lifting her head.

Melisandre fumbled with the buttons on Jon’s leather jerkin.

“Help me get his clothes off…I need to examine the other wounds” she said.

Val strode over to the side of the cot and produced a bone knife from the sheath at her hip.

“This is faster”, she said as she slipped the knife underneath the buttons on his leather jerkin and cut them off one by one before peeling the garment aside. Then she ripped open his shirt and slashed the sleeves to uncover his upper body completely.

His belly was a mangled mass of slowly coagulating blood oozing from a wound that Melisandre determined to be at least two inches deep. Then they carefully lifted him and rolled him to on to his side to discover another wound, not quite as deep, between his shoulder blades.

The woman in red stared at the blonde woman, her eyes glittering with intensity.

“How many times to count”, she replied as she balled up his torn shirt and pressed it to his belly to staunch the slow flow of blood from escaping.

Jon suddenly uttered a sharp cry as his face twisted in pain. Val’s refocused her concentration on maintaining pressure on the wound as he began to flail. She called out in desperation to Melisandre who had already risen to root about in the maester’s cupboards.

“Milk of the poppy”, Val gasped, struggling to keep his hands away from hers as he writhed in agony.

Melisandre uttered a small cry of triumph before whirling around with a small bottle in her grasp. She quickly measured out a dose and administered it, drop by drop, between Jon’s lips. Then she laid it aside before pressing gentle but firm hands on his shoulders.

“Relax, Lord Commander”, she said soothingly as he continued to buck in response to the pain. “Give the medication a chance to take hold…we’re going to take good care of you”.

Minutes ticked by in relative silence, broken only by the occasional moan that escaped Jon’s lips, before his limbs began to slow in response to the painkiller. As the numbness crept over his body, his face took on a more serene look as if he had slipped into peaceful slumber.

Once she was assured that he would no longer resist her keeping pressure on his injured belly, Val slowly raised the bloodstained bundle of cloth and determined that the bleeding had finally stopped.

Melisandre filled a basin with fresh water and laid it next to the cot. Then she dipped a fresh cloth in the water, wrung it out and began to gently wipe away the blood from his body.

Val reached over and indicated that she would take over the bathing.

“See if you can find a needle and some silk”, she said. Melisandre nodded and rose to search the cupboard once more.
The door suddenly burst open, kicked in by Satin whose arms were full of small bottles that clinked as he entered the room. Hot on his heels was Jon’s great white direwolf, Ghost.

“He met me outside the Lord Commander’s quarters”, panted Satin as he unloaded the bottles on to the wooden examination table.

Ghost padded over to Jon’s side and opened his mouth in a silent whimper. Then he lowered himself to the floor and stretched out next to the cot, his head resting between his paws and his red eyes fixed on the open door.

Melisandre checked each bottle until she was satisfied that Satin had not erred.

“I have another task for you”, she said to him as she began measuring out the contents of each bottle into a stone bowl. “I want you to fetch a clean bucket from the kitchen, take it outside and fill it halfway with fresh snow”.

She paused and looked up at him.

“I need to emphasize that the snow must be pristine…no horse piss, no bird droppings, no mud trampled into it…and then take it back to the kitchen and melt it down. Allow it to come to a rolling boil…no less. Once that is done then bring the water to me. Be careful not slosh it…time is of the essence and we can’t afford to wait for more”, she continued.

“Yes, milady”, said Satin with a quick nod before fleeing the room.

Val rose with the basin full of bloody water and crossed over to the window. She pushed open the shutters and poured the contents of the basin on to the roof below. She watched the rivulets of red water race each other down the slope of the roof until they dripped off the edge to the muddy yard below.

She stood there for a few minutes to survey the ghastly scene before her. The bodies of Jon’s attackers still lay side by side on the ground while the queen’s men wandered about collecting the limbs that the giant, Wun Wun, had torn from the dead men in retaliation for their assault on the Lord Commander.

“That’ll teach ‘em”, muttered Val as she closed the shutters.

As Val refilled the basin with fresh water, Melisandre ground the dried herbs with a wooden pestle until they were the consistency of flour.

“What is all that for?” asked Val as she tenderly daubed around the wound on Jon’s back with one hand while the other supported his shoulder.

“This will become a poultice”, replied Melisandre as she laid the pestle aside. Then she picked up the needle and raised it to the light streaming in through the cracks in the shutters so that she could thread the fine silk through the hole at the end.

She was holding the needle over a candle flame when Satin arrived carrying the bucket of water.

“Bring it over here”, instructed Melisandre. Satin laid it on the table next to the bowl of herbs.

Melisandre passed the needle over to Val and told her to begin sewing Jon’s wounds closed while she finished preparing the poultice with drops of the boiled water added to the herb mixture. As she worked at the concoction, she glanced at Satin who hovered anxiously nearby.
“Don’t stand there with idle hands”, she said as she pointed at a small sheet of fabric resting on the table near a corner. “Start tearing that muslin into small strips”.

Jon uttered a low moan as Val’s needle bit into his sensitive skin. Satin stared at him as he reached for the fabric, his hands shaking slightly.

“Please don’t let him die”, he whispered as he gripped the muslin with both hands and ripped it apart.

Melisandre glanced at Satin and gave him a small, reassuring smile.

“I believe that the Lord of Light is not ready to welcome the Lord Commander into his arms just yet”, she said as she poured some water into a small wooden bowl. Then she added some yellow powder and mixed it together quickly.

Val had completed stitching the gash on Jon’s neck just as Melisandre knelt beside her. She daubed at the wound with a piece of muslin dipped in the yellow liquid before smearing the poultice on top.

“The liquid will help keep the wounds clean and free from infection”, she explained, “while the poultice will aid in the healing process”.

Val gave her a look of curiosity tinged with admiration.

“I never took you to be a healer”, she said as she laid the small square of muslin that Satin passed to her over the wound and pressed it gently in place.

Melisandre’s lips tightened slightly.

“I’ve had to perform many duties over the years in service of R’hllor”, she said as she straightened up. “The Lord of Light gave me hands to serve him and it is through his divine light that I have developed the skills to serve others in his name”.

They continued on in silence with Val sewing small neat stitches upon which Melisandre spread her healing medications. When they finished closing and preparing the wounds for sealing, Satin wrapped his arms around Jon’s shoulders and raised him up while the women bound his torso with the clean fabric. Then he tenderly laid Jon back on the cot and covered him with the warm furs.

They were startled by a rap on the door and the clearing of a throat. Ghost raised his head and bared his teeth menacingly.

“Begging your pardon, milady”, said the commander of the queensguard as he shrank back slightly, “but her grace is concerned for your safety and has asked me to post a couple of guards outside the door for the night”.

“That won’t be necessary, ser”, Melisandre replied coolly. “As you can see the Lord Commander’s wolf is more than enough protection”.

The commander took a couple of hesitant steps further into the room and then halted when Ghost rose to his feet and bared his teeth menacingly.

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“Milady”, he said, desperation rising in his voice, “right now tensions with the wildlings are at fever pitch…if the Lord Commander should pass there is great potential for a bloodbath. Please…let us offer you our protection…it would ease the queen’s mind greatly”.

“That Lord of Light is all the protection I need, ser”, she replied as she gestured to him to leave. “Go now and pray to him for guidance. May his light shine upon all of you and protect you from the
powers of eternal darkness”.

“But, milady…” he sputtered as she shooed him out the door. He was still protesting when she closed the door firmly behind him.

“He’s right, you know”, said Val. “If Lord Crow should die then this fragile truce is at an end. Then there will be outright war because there is nobody left who has enough influence to stop it…not your hairy queen, not that self-proclaimed fool of a king, Gerrick Kingsblood, and certainly none of the other crows”.

Melisandre crossed over to the table and busied herself putting away the medical supplies.

“Then…” she replied as she stacked the linens, “it is in everyone’s interest to keep him alive. The next few hours will be critical. As long as there is no damage to his organs and he does not bleed internally then he has a fighting chance”.

As the darkness set in, Satin was sent to the kitchen to procure some food and drink while Melisandre and Val retained their vigil by Jon’s side. Once they had supped, it was agreed that the three of them would take turns watching over Jon with Satin taking the first watch.

“Wake me when it’s my time”, said Val in a low voice as she paused by the open door. Then she slipped into the corridor, softly closing the door behind her.

Satin sat down on the edge of the cot and took Jon’s limp hand in his. He brushed the back of Jon’s hand lightly while keeping his eyes trained on the injured man’s face.

“How long have you been in love with him?” asked Melisandre.

Surprise lit up his face as he locked eyes with her and then fear crept in unbidden. She could see the denial forming on his lips until he took a deep breath and a sense of resolve appeared to wash over him.

“Long enough”, he said with a sigh.

Melisandre smiled slightly and pulled up a chair.

“Milady”, Satin demurred, “please don’t feel the need to stay. You must need your rest”.

She shook her head as she folded her hands neatly across her belly.

“I no longer sleep”, she said. “The Lord of Light has given me infinite energy so that I am always prepared to do his bidding”.

She glanced at Jon before turning her attention back to Satin.

“Does he…does he know?” she asked.

Satin lowered his gaze and then gently released Jon’s hand. He shook his head.

“No”, he replied hoarsely.

Then he raised his eyes.

“And he must never know”, he said, his tone low and gutteral. “I can’t risk having him send me away like the others”.
She gave him a puzzled look.

“When he became Lord Commander, he started isolating himself from his friends and allies. Then he started sending them away to serve elsewhere”, he explained with a shake of his head. “I don’t understand…all of this might have been avoided if he had chosen to keep us nearby…to confide in us of his intentions. We might have been able to dissuade him, warn him or, at least, protect him from the knives”.

“To the Lord Commander, leadership is a burden that he chose to shoulder alone”, she said. “He knew that if he sinned then he alone would have to accept the consequences unflinchingly. And now he may be paying the highest price of all for his decisions”.

She leaned over to refill their flagons of wine and then sat back.

“Regardless of your feelings towards him he never would have sent you away,” she said before taking a sip.

Satin looked doubtful.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“He kept you here to protect you. The men know who you are so that is why he made you his steward…to keep you safe”, she replied.

He scowled and stared into his cup.

“I’m not weak”, he retorted. “I’m an excellent archer and any one of them will tell you I’m fearless in a fight”.

“I never said you were weak”, said Melisandre with a slight shake of her head. “But you are…vulnerable”.

Satin swallowed hard and looked away briefly.

“I confess that I’ll be lost if he dies…but I’ll survive”, he said dully.

Melisandre gave him one of her rare smiles.

“Your brand of love is rare…altruistic love…you expect nothing of him in return…only that he be present in your life”, she said.

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Satin took up Jon’s hand again, stroking his face and murmuring encouraging words while Melisandre stared at the fire that burned steadily on the grate. After enough time had passed she could see Satin’s eyes begin to droop. So before fatigue could overtake him, she ordered him to fetch Val before retiring to his room for the night.

Val knocked on the door softly before pushing open the door. Ghost raised his head briefly as she approached the cot where Jon still slept soundly, seemingly oblivious to his state. She leaned over him to listen to his breaths, checking for that telltale rattle that usually signaled that the end was near. Then she glanced at Melisandre.

“Any change?” she asked.

Melisandre shook her head.

“He’s holding his own”, she replied.
Val leaned over and touched Jon’s face, tracing a line from his brow to his chin, and then placed the back of her hand against his forehead for a few seconds. She turned back to Melisandre.

“He feels a little warm to the touch...have you checked for signs of fever setting in?” she asked.

Melisandre shook her head.

“Stop hovering over him like an over anxious mother. I assure you that nothing is changed”, she snapped. “There is fresh water in the basin if you want to give him a bath. If nothing else it would give you something to do while we wait”.

Val opened her mouth and was about to retaliate with an angry response but changed her mind. She rose to fetch the basin and rummaged about for clean cloth. Then she sat on the edge of the cot and dipped the cloth in the water.

“That was uncalled for”, she said sullenly as she gently wiped his face.

Melisandre shrugged her shoulders.

“I never meant to give offense”, she said.

“Shouldn’t you be abed?” asked Val irritably as she dragged the cloth across Jon’s shoulders. Then she stopped and turned to Melisandre when she didn’t receive an immediate response.

“I couldn’t sleep any longer”, Melisandre replied.

Val chuckled.

“Well, I know that’s a lie because Satin told me that you kept him company during his watch”, she said as she returned to bathing Jon, carefully skirting around the edges of the bandage on his neck.

A secretive look passed over Melisandre’s face.

“Why do you continue to lie to yourself about your feelings for the Lord Commander?” she asked.

Val paused and turned to stare at the priestess. Then she frowned and turned back to bathing Jon.

“There’s no sense pining after something you can never have”, she replied as she wrung out the cloth. Then she set the basin on the floor and rose from the bed. She picked up Satin’s empty cup and poured herself some wine.

“Did it irk you when he refused the king’s offer?” asked Melisandre.

Val took a gulp of wine and raised her hand to swipe at her mouth.

“Not really”, she drawled. “I had no desire to be married off to a man I barely knew in order to satisfy the political ambitions of some southern king. But I admired his reason for not accepting the offer. My opinion of him changed when I found out why so I began to watch him more closely. Every day I watched him running himself ragged trying to please everyone... your king, the free folk, his fellow crows...and ending up not really pleasing anyone. And then, just when he tries to commit one selfish act by announcing that he was going south to save his sister from the clutches of a man who sounds like a monster and pre-empt an attack on the Watch, the crows try to kill him”.

She shook her head and looked away in disgust.

“They considered it an act of desertion”, said Melisandre, “and so felt obligated to execute him on
the spot”.

“Bastards”, whispered Val vehemently.

“Is that when your feelings for him changed?” asked Melisandre.

Val shook her head.

“I knew how I felt about him when he entrusted me with finding Tormund and bringing him to Castle Black”, she said. “There were any number of others who could have done the same…but he turned to me. And I didn’t have it in my heart to refuse him”.

“I must admit I was surprised when you returned with your prize”, said Melisandre. “I would have expected you to disappear into the hinterland”.

“Oh believe me…it crossed my mind more than once”, replied Val. “But I knew I could never forgive myself if I betrayed his trust. And I knew how important it was to him to have Tormund by his side. So I gritted my teeth and pressed on until I found him and brought him here”.

Val glanced at Jon as he stirred in his sleep. She reached over and drew the furs back over his shoulders.

“So…what happens to him if he survives his wounds?” she asked as she furrowed her brow.

Melisandre laid her empty cup aside and leaned back in her chair.

“I have the ear of the queen…I will recommend that we delay any trial until the Lord Commander has recovered from his injuries and the situation has stabilized. And then, by that time, all that has transpired will no longer matter”, she answered cryptically.

Val had been on the verge of asking the red priestess what she meant when she was interrupted by a knock and the sound of the hinges groaning as door slowly opened. It was a bleary-eyed Satin.

“Sorry…I couldn’t sleep any longer not knowing how he’s doing”, he said apologetically.

“He is unchanged”, said Melisandre as she rose from her seat and crossed over to Jon’s side to lay a cool hand on his forehead.

Ghost yawned as Satin slipped quietly into the room and closed the door. He leaned against it wringing his hands.

“Many people have been asking about him…they are worried that he may already be dead and that we are hiding the truth from them. There have been some skirmishes between the brothers and the wildlings and the queen’s men have confined some to their quarters while others have been thrown into the ice cells to cool off”, he said. “And there is talk of executing him for breaking his oath”.

Val swore and stood up.

“I’ll steal him away before I let that happen”, she cried, her eyes blazing.

Melisandre gestured to them for calm.

“There will be no execution”, she said. “The Lord of Light has shown me the future in the fires. Soon the Lord Commander will recover from his wounds and there will be talk of a trial…and yes, talk of execution. But the Wall is doomed to fall and the powers of darkness will soon descend upon us. This will force us to band together in the face of a common foe. We will need the Lord
Commander’s arm and his bastard sword unless we are prepared to meet a cold and certain death.”

There was a rap at the door and the muffled voice of a queen’s man from the other side.

“Milady…the queen said it is most urgent that you meet with her. The unrest is causing her much strain and she is looking for reassurance that the state of Lord Commander Snow’s health will not become the spark that starts an open rebellion”, he said.

“I’m coming”, said Melisandre.

Then she turned to Val and Satin before opening the door.

“I shan’t be long”, she said. “We shall speak more when I return”.

Val and Satin locked eyes after the door clicked shut.

“Do you believe her?” asked Satin.

Val’s eyes darted to the door before she returned her gaze to Satin and nodded.

“I don’t trust her visions but I have no doubt she holds some sway over that bearded queen of hers”, she whispered. “She won’t let him die if she truly believes her red god has need of him”.

“And what if she realizes that she is wrong?” asked Satin.

Val shook her head.

“She is too fanatical to ever admit that she is anything but infallible”, she replied. “But I will speak to Tormund in private…we will have to form a back-up plan just in case her queen is not so easily persuaded”.

She bent down to lay a hand on Jon’s pale cheek.

“Do you know of a way to get him out of here safely…past those blasted guards?” she asked.

Satin nodded.

“There are passages known only to a few…but you’ll need me to show you the way”, he replied.

Satin reached out and took her hand.

“We have a pact but I want to be clear…I go wherever he goes”, he said, glancing at Jon’s face.

Val smiled and gave his hand a squeeze.

“You and me both”, she whispered.
“You, boy, are proving to be more trouble than you’re worth”, roared Tormund as he stood before
the open door, his great, white beard almost bristling in agreement.

Val raised her eyes and glared at the broad, profane man who practically filled the doorway and
raised a finger to her lips to silence him. He glanced at Jon and shook his head.

“How does he still sleep?” he asked peevishly. “It’s been three days now and every time I come to
visit he’s spark out”.

Val rose silently from her post next to Jon’s bedside and pulled Tormund into the room. Then she
reached around him to close and bolt the door.

“The red woman has been keeping him sedated”, she said in a low voice as she shoved him towards
the center of the room.

She raised a tumbler and pointed to the skin of wine lying next to it. He nodded and dragged a chair
towards him, the legs squealing on the wooden floorboards, before dropping unceremoniously on to
it.

After taking a swig of the wine, he leaned back in the protesting chair and fixed his eyes on Jon’s
sleeping form.

“Why?” he asked, his voice lowered. “Does she wish him to turn into veal? He should be moving
around by now…he needs to get the blood flowing through his veins. His muscles will shrink and
become spongy and useless if he doesn’t use them. Although I fear that it may already be too late for
his cock. It’s probably a poor, wizened little thing by now…doomed to wither away due to lack of
use. Har!”

Val flushed and shook her head.

“She says that the more he rests the quicker he will heal”, she murmured as she took her customary
seat by Jon’s side.

“Bah!” exclaimed Tormund before taking another gulp of wine. He leaned forward, dropping his
chin to his chest and looking at her with concern in his eyes.

“I’m being serious”, he growled. “The boy needs to start moving. He’ll not get better any faster lying
there like a corpse. He needs to move his limbs because the faster we get him out of here the better”.

A glimmer of fear appeared in Val’s eyes.

“Why…what have you heard?” she asked.

His eyes darted around the room as if the walls had suddenly sprouted eyes and ears.

“The queen has sent fifty of her men to find out the truth of the letter. If her king is dead then word
has it she may demand that the red witch perform a ritual to bring back his lifeless form”, he said in
hushed and measured tones.

“What kind of ritual?” asked Val.

She watched as Tormund’s eyes flitted to Jon’s face and then she understood.
“She can’t mean to burn him…she helped save him”, she sputtered.

“Why did she burn Mance?” he replied. “The crows should have hanged him for violating his oath but she insisted on a burning. Why?...because there is power in a king’s blood. That is how she works her sorcery. And for the life of a king there must be a significant sacrifice”.

Val felt her throat constrict and she swallowed hard so she could speak.

“But he’s just a bastard”, she whispered hoarsely.

Tormund nodded.

“Aye…and his father’s people ruled these lands for thousands of years before finally bending the knee to the dragons. He carries the blood of the Stark kings of Winter in his veins and she knows it. She serves only one master here…her red god…and she won’t hesitate to carry out his commands. If her god tells her to sacrifice the boy so that her hero king can be resurrected then she will do it without question”, he said. “So I ask you…does she keep him sedated so that he will heal or so that he remains as docile as a lamb before being led to the slaughter?”

He leaned back in his chair and took up his cup.

“Most of the crows are too weak and afraid to stand up for their Lord Commander…as far as they’re concerned he’s been labeled an oath breaker and is deserving of death. Right now I’d wager we’re all that stands between the boy and the fires. So he needs to recover enough strength so that we can spirit him safely out of here. But until that time comes you need to keep the red woman in the dark…don’t let on that you suspect that her motives for caring for him are less than pure”, he continued after another quaff of liquid.

“But…she says that the fires foretold that the Wall is doomed to fall soon and that we will need him to fight against the might of the Others”, said Val. Deep in her heart she knew he was right but an ember of hope still burned inside of her that spoke to the truth of the red woman’s words.

Tormund shook his head and slammed his cup on the table. Then he leaned forward and stared into her eyes.

“The Wall has stood like a silent sentinel for thousands of years, repelling all kinds of foe both human and otherwise”, he replied softly. “The Wall is not doomed to fall. She is spouting nonsense…the kind of lies your mother told you to make you behave. Heed my words…get him well enough to get him away from here as soon as possible”.

He stood up.

“I’m leaving for Hardhome, tomorrow”, he said with a heavy sigh. “I came by to tell the boy that I am still honouring his request to lead a mission to save the men, women and children stranded there…although I am more and more convinced that by the time we get there we’ll find more of them dead than alive. But we will be carrying enough provisions for ourselves and more…we still have to have some hope that there will be somebody left to bring back”.

He laid a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve sent word to my people at Oakenshield. They’ll be expecting you. The crows there are still loyal to the lad. But you’ll have to figure out a way to get out of here without the queen’s men and the crows at Castle Black finding out about it first. And...he's going to need some persuasion to leave”, he said as he patted her gently.
She nodded as she glanced at Jon.

“He’s steward, Satin, says he might know a way”, she said.

“Can you trust him?” asked Tormund as he turned towards the door.

Val nodded.

Tormund let out a slow breath and glanced back at Jon.

“That’s good then…there’s not many crows I’d trust nowadays”, he replied as he reached for the door.

Before he could slide back the bolt they heard a couple of thuds and some scratching from the other side of the door. Val’s hand automatically flew to the knife at her hip while Tormund regarded the closed door with suspicion clouding his eyes.

“Who’s making that bloody racket?” shouted Tormund. “Are you trying to wake the dead?”

“The Lord Commander…please tell me he’s all right”, cried Satin from the corridor.

Val relaxed slightly while Tormund flashed a manic grin at her before unlatching the door and yanking it open.

Satin stood stock still just outside the door with two steaming bowls of mutton stew balanced in each hand and a look of panic on his face. Ghost pushed past him impatiently to take up his preferred spot on the floor next to the cot.

Tormund beckoned to Satin to enter with a flourish.

“I’m just fucking with you, young crow”, said Tormund with a throaty chuckle as Satin brushed past him nervously. “Your precious Lord Commander is still very much alive”.

“I apologize, ser”, said Satin as he set the bowls on the examination table. “I would have brought you some food if I had known you were here”.

‘Don’t concern yourself…I’ll not be staying much longer”, said Tormund with a wave of his hand.

Jon stirred in his sleep, his tongue darting out briefly to lick at his dry lips.

Tormund glanced at the silent wolf that lay loyally by his master’s bed.

“Been out hunting again, I see”, said Tormund noting the blood that encrusted Ghost’s snout before turning back to Jon. “Get some real food into you, lad…you can’t live on what your wolf gets down its gullet. Har!”

Val and Satin looked at Tormund in surprise.

“Borroq sussed him out as a skinchanger soon enough”, said Tormund as he turned to leave. “They know how to recognize their own kind. He’s probably been beyond these walls many a time these past few days without anyone realizing he was gone. Too bad his body was too injured to follow”.

Val watched Tormund’s bulky frame disappear from view while Satin gawked at his Lord Commander in astonishment.

“What did he mean by that?” asked Satin.
Val rose and busied herself by gathering up some soiled linens and dropping them into the wooden bucket beneath the table. Then she thrust it at Satin.

“There are some who can enter the minds of animals and see the world through a different set of eyes...eyes that are free to soar through the skies or burrow into the bowels of the earth”, she explained briskly. “I'm sure Tormund was just making a jape at Lord Crow’s expense. Now get rid of these cloths and fetch some clean water. We have a lot of work to do before she returns to check on him”.

Satin opened his mouth to ask more but shut it again quickly, silenced by the look on her face. Then he nodded and left the room.

Val crossed the room to the window.

“This room is beginning to smell worse than a bear’s den after a long winter of hibernation”, she muttered as she pushed open the shutters.

But instead of breathing fresh, cool air her nostrils were assaulted by the smell of burning flesh. She leaned over the window sill and spotted the dying embers of a large fire in the yard. She could barely make out the shapes of three blackened bodies that still smoldered, transformed into twisted lumps of coal from the intensity of the fire.

And standing nearby, flanked by three queen’s men, was Melisandre. The look on her face from such a distance was virtually unreadable, seemingly expressing neither sorrow nor satisfaction. She must have sensed that Val was watching her as she suddenly glanced up at her and nodded slightly.

Val felt a rush of grief overwhelm her as she turned away from the window.

“More of my people die every day”, she whispered as her face crumpled before turning to greet Satin as he entered the room.

“Right”, she said as she quickly composed her face. She threw back the furs that covered Jon. “We’re going to get him cleaned up and fed...even if we have to persuade him to eat like a he’s a reluctant toddler”.

Jon moaned and shivered slightly as the cool air met his overheated skin but his eyes remained stubbornly closed.

Val wrung out a cloth and passed it to Satin.

“Start with his face and work your way down while I check for bedsores”, she instructed him. She knew that open bedsores, if left untreated, often proved to be as fatal as any knife wound. Infections fed on any and all openings, uncaring as to how the flesh was rent.

She ran her fingers over Jon’s lightly down his back, pausing at times to probe the small red bumps and scars that she discovered along the way. She watched Jon’s face for signs of discomfort...a wince or a twist of the mouth...until she was satisfied that he was free of bedsores for now. Then she tugged on the waistband of his smallclothes until Satin laid a hand on hers to stop her.

“A lady such as yourself shouldn’t be peeking behind the curtain...so to speak”, he said coyly. “Let me attend to the Lord Commander's more manly bits...it’s only right”.

She barked out a laugh and threw up her hands in defeat. She expected quite reasonably that Jon possessed nothing that she hadn’t already seen before many times but she deferred to his steward’s sense of propriety. It wouldn’t do to be accused of taking advantage of Lord Crow’s manhood while
he lay helpless in his bed, despite Tormund’s opinion on the state of the man’s pitiable organ.

While Satin finished bathing and examining Jon, Val produced some clean smallclothes. Then Jon began to moan louder and his eyelashes began to flutter.

“It’s all right, Lord Commander”, said Satin as he struggled to remove the soiled underwear. “I’m not trying to harm you”.

Val sighed and reached out to help him as Jon continued to bat away at Satin’s hands.

Satin grunted as he wrapped his arms around Jon’s shoulders while Val gently peeled off the soiled underwear. Tormund is clearly mistaken on this count, she thought as she threw the smallclothes to the floor…Lord Crow is still amply equipped.

When she finished fastening the clean smallclothes, she raised her gaze to Jon’s face only to find him watching her gravely with his grey, stormy eyes and a puzzled expression on his face.

“Lord Commander…you’re awake”, said Satin, the relief palpable in his voice.

Jon glanced down at the dressing on his belly and then raised a hesitant hand to the covering on his neck. Then he looked from Val to Satin, his brows knit together.

“What happened?” he croaked.

Val perched on the edge of the cot and folded her hands in her lap. Then she glanced at Satin before speaking.

“What do you remember?” she asked softly.

Jon stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before squeezing his eyes shut. Then he opened them again and turned to Val.

“The letter”, he replied hoarsely. “I…I remember the letter from Bolton threatening to attack the Watch. I knew that Castle Black is well on nigh indefensible from the south so I planned on attacking him from the north with an army of free folk volunteers. Under the circumstances I couldn’t compel my brothers to abandon their post here on the Wall”.

He closed his eyes again.

“But then…they tried to kill me”, he continued without emotion. “They must have believed that I had betrayed my vows”.

Then he began to recite the other contents of the letter.

“Stannis is dead…Bolton has his sword…Mance is his prisoner…” he said.

“I saw Mance burn”, interrupted Val.

Jon shook his head.

“It was Rattleshirt”, he replied. “Lady Melisandre created a glamour to make him appear to be Mance so she could send him to Winterfell to rescue my sister. In return, she assured him the safety of his son”.

Then his eyes flew open again.
“Arya”, he gasped. “Arya…my little sister is missing and Bolton wants her back. I have to find her before he gets to her”.

He began to struggle to rise from his cot until the pain and the stiffness in his joints stopped him from climbing out of the bed. He lay panting against the pillows, already exhausted from the exertion.

Val leaned forward.

“You’re in no fit state to help her right now”, she said, patting his shoulder.

“Lord Commander…I’ve brought you a bowl of stew to break your fast”, said Satin as he leaned over Jon with the bowl in his grasp. “It’s rather lukewarm now but I can take it back to the kitchen and warm it up if you prefer”.

Jon shook his head.

“Don’t bother”, he replied. “I’m not hungry”.

Val stood up and folded her arms.

“You need to eat”, she said sternly. “If you still intend to seek your sister then you need to get your strength back and give your body the energy it needs to heal”.

She stared him until she could see him start to wilt under her gaze. She knew he was stubborn but in his weakened state he was no match for her. He reluctantly took the bowl from Satin and began eating the stew, pausing between bites to rest. With a bit more coaxing from Satin, he managed to eat half the contents of the bowl before finally passing it back to his steward. Then he closed his eyes and began to doze lightly. Val leaned down to tuck the furs around his shoulders while Satin passed the half-eaten stew to Ghost to finish off.

Satin offered the other bowl to Val which she accepted gratefully. It had been a long day of constant vigil and she was beginning to feel the strain and the need for nourishment.

“You go get some rest”, said Satin as he collected her bowl. “It’s my turn now”.

Val nodded and rose from her chair. As she brushed past Satin he caught her hand.

“What did Tormund say?” he asked.

She raised her eyes briefly and sighed.

“He has heard that the red woman intends to burn your Lord Commander in order to raise her king from the dead”, she answered bluntly.

Satin’s face went ashen. He gripped the table and leaned against it heavily.

“Then we need to get him out of here”, he said.

“Then we are in agreement”, she replied. “But we cannot move him until his wounds are sufficiently healed. But even then I feared that he would not come…that he would feel honour bound to face up to what he did and want to take the opportunity to defend his actions… to accept whatever justice they chose to mete out”.

“And now…?” asked Satin.

She smiled and glanced at Jon.
“He wants to find his sister above all else”, she replied. “So…we convince him to allow us to smuggle him out of here so he can search for her…with our help, of course”.

Satin grinned at her.

“I believe we have the beginnings of a plan”, he said with a nod.
Chapter 3

She stood at the door with four queen’s men standing silent and expressionless behind her. And while she issued to instructions to them to remain in the corridor, Satin wondered what had happened that she felt compelled to double her normal complement of guards.

As she entered the room she stiffened briefly when she saw Jon sitting on the edge of his cot, his head lowered and his hands placed firmly on the mattress for support. A flicker of surprise crossed her face, disrupting her usual mask of inscrutability.

“Lord Commander…it is good to see you finally awake”, said Melisandre.

“It’s good to have finally rejoined the land of the living”, replied Jon as he turned to her with a wan smile. He winced as he struggled to rise from his bed.

“Please don’t trouble yourself to get up on my behalf, Lord Commander”, she said. “T’would be better if you remained as you are as I intend to examine your wounds momentarily”.

Jon, bleary-eyed and pale, sank back down with a sigh and bowed his head once more.

She glanced at the small vessel filled with the sleeping draught that she had prepared earlier. It was clear that it stood untouched and she turned to Satin with a small frown. He flashed a smile at her that he hoped looked disingenuous.

“I was waiting until it was clear that the Lord Commander was in need of it”, he said as he removed the tray of partially eaten food from his bedside table.

“Did you now…” she murmured as she removed her red cloak and laid it across the back of a chair. She poured some water into the basin and plunged her hands into the water, swishing them about for a few seconds before drying them with a clean strip of muslin. Then she wrinkled her nose and turned back to Satin.

“The linens could use a change”, she said. “It smells like a piece of spoiled meat in here”.

Satin nodded his head.

“Very good, milady”, he said. “I will fetch some from the airing cupboard”.

He pulled open the door and glanced at the two guards flanking the door before shouldering his way between them.

The airing cupboard was located just in a corridor off the kitchen. He passed his hands over the clean sheets, looking for linens that hadn’t been washed to the point that you could see through them if you held them up to the light and yet had softened enough after repeated washings.

When he found some that were satisfactory he turned and found himself face to face with a couple of the men dressed in the furs made from the pelts of many different animals. They wore queer-looking necklaces bearing stones with markings on them and small bones that had yellowed with age. The older of the two gave him a predatory, gap-toothed smile while the other remained grim, watching the corner with menacing eyes.

“How fares Lord Crow?” asked the older man softly.
Satin stared at him dumbly for a couple of seconds before replying.

“He shows more improvement every day”, replied Satin.

"That’s good…that’s good”, murmured the man. “You keep watch over him, young crow, because watching is what you crows do best from your perch high above us. Watching while the kneelers round us up and throw us into your ice cells…watching while they threaten to expel us north of the Wall…watching while they burn us. Aye…watching is truly what you crows do best”.

Then he spat on the floor and leaned in closer to Satin until their noses fairly touched.

“You need to more than watch, lad…you crows need to turn around and listen. Winter is almost upon us and we have been very busy preparing for the long night ahead. So if you listen very carefully you might just hear the sounds of warning in the darkness…the sound of thousands of knives being sharpened”, said the man.

Satin stood still, his nostrils flaring with every breath.

“That sounded very much like a threat” he said softly.

The man grinned as he drew back and placed a hand on Satin’s shoulder.

“Nobody is safe in this world, lad”, he replied. “Everybody needs to keep watch for the signs before it’s too late. Give our best to Lord Crow…stay close to his little nest, stay under his wing, and you might just survive the long winter to come”.

He clapped his hand on Satin’s shoulder before nodding at the other man. Then, as stealthily as they appeared, they melted away into the shadows.

Satin took a deep breath before returning to the maester’s quarters. Two guards remained outside the door.

Jon was alone and lying on the cot staring at the ceiling. His face was sullen and his mouth was tightly sealed. He turned to Satin when he heard him enter.

“What did she have to say, Lord Commander?” asked Satin as he set the linens down on the foot of the bed.

Jon continued to stare at the ceiling.

“The queen has relieved me of my duties and confined me to this room until further notice”, said Jon. “And I’m to be tried for desertion”.

Satin was aghast.

“She doesn’t have the authority…it should be up to the remaining brothers to decide if and when you should face a tribunal”, he said.

“I explained that to Lady Melisandre and she said that the queen is awaiting the arrival of more senior brothers from Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower to preside over my trial. In the meantime, I wait here in limbo…watched over by the queen’s men”, said Jon.

“Well…it’s going to take a long time for them to get here…the winter storms have been raging all around us and show no signs of abating any time soon”, said Satin.

Jon glanced at the fresh linens and began to rise on to his elbows. He threw back the covers and
swung his legs gingerly over the edge of the bed. Then he braced his hands on the mattress before rising up with a grunt.

“Let me help you, Lord Commander”, cried Satin as he reached out towards Jon. But Jon, his face in a grimace, shook his head emphatically. He lurched towards the nearby chair and plopped down on to it without ceremony, his face twisted in pain. Then he leaned forward for a minute or two, panting, with one arm wrapped around his belly and the other clutching the arm of the chair.

Satin stood before him for a few seconds shaking his head.

“You need to learn to let us help you, Lord Commander”, he gently chided Jon.

Jon glanced at him with a smile playing on his lips.

“Apparently I’m a slow learner”, he murmured as he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Satin began stripping the bed, tossing the soiled linens on the floor.

“So…what is the news outside of these four walls?” asked Jon. Satin paused briefly before continuing to smooth out the sheet he spread upon the bare mattress.

Satin began to share the gossip he had heard during the morning meal…petty grievances, recent acquisitions, rumours of wildling women sharing their favours with some of the men of the Watch.

Jon cleared his throat and opened his eyes, disrupting the flow of Satin’s discourse.

“Thank you, Satin…now perhaps you could tell me what happened to you while I was closeted with Lady Melisandre”, said Jon.

Satin stilled his hands and straightened up. Then he reached for the furs and turned away quickly so that Jon couldn’t see the look of apprehension on his face.

“Nothing of consequence, Lord Commander”, replied Satin blandly, hoping that Jon wouldn’t notice how his hands shook slightly.

“Your face said otherwise when you entered the room”, said Jon.

Satin pondered a lie before thinking better of it. He was guilty of keeping many secrets but at this moment he was afraid his body language would betray him. He glanced over his shoulder at Jon.

“The wildlings grow weary of the yoke the queen’s men have placed on them”, he whispered.

“There is talk of rebellion”.

Jon opened his mouth to demand more details when a rap at the door and the groan of the rusty hinges interrupted him.

The red woman stood in the doorway, flanked by her two guards. She glanced at Satin.

“Leave us”, she ordered.

Satin looked at Jon who nodded his assent. Satin smoothed out the furs one last time before bowing to the priestess.

“As you wish, milady”, he said, his mouth taut.

As he pushed his way past her she grabbed his arm and pulled him out into the corridor. Jon watched
as Satin’s eyes grew wide with surprise as she whispered into Satin’s ear. Then Satin gave Jon a final glance, a mixture of fear and curiosity, before disappearing from sight.

The red woman closed the door behind her and stood before Jon with her hands loosely clasped together.

“The king is dead”, she said without preamble. “A contingent of queen’s men met up with a party of his men bearing his body back to Castle Black”.

“Please convey my condolences to Her Grace and Princess Shireen”, said Jon before bowing his head and squeezing his eyes shut as a burning sensation spread across his belly. He sucked in his breath, waiting for the pain to pass, praying that it did not last as long as the last time.

He listened to the rustle of her skirts as she walked over to the examination table. He heard the trickle of the wine being poured into two goblets and raised his head when she thrust one of them before his nose. He accepted it gratefully as she pulled up the second chair and sat upon it with a sigh.

“The queen…the queen is taking the news very hard”, said Melisandre.

Jon nodded.

“As to be expected”, he said with a slight gasp, noting with relief that the pain was finally starting to subside. “She is a very devoted woman”.

“In light of her husband’s death, she has made an unusual request of me”, she said as she set the cup down. “She has requested a resurrection…a sacrifice, as it were, so that her beloved lord should rise again and resume his destiny”.

Jon raised his head and looked at her in astonishment.

“She wants you to burn somebody in order to raise the king from the dead?” he asked. “Who?”

She stared at him for a few seconds before dipping her head slightly.

“You”, she replied softly.

Jon’s face darkened and he gripped the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles looked white.

“Am I to face a trial before this sentence is passed then?” he growled.

She gazed steadily at him before slowly shaking her head.

Jon leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, his face flushed with anger and a pounding sound so loud in his ears that he almost didn’t hear the words she spoke next.

“Pardon me, my lady…?” he asked, wanting to make sure that he had not misheard.

“But you will not die, Lord Commander”, she repeated.

Jon had become fractious and embittered. He did not care to bandy about with words.

“I understand the ritual, my lady”, he said hoarsely. “A life for a life is required to fulfill her grace’s command. So if I am not to die then who is?”

“A raper…a murderer…maybe both…there’s no shortage of villains locked up in the ice cells. The queen’s men have been most diligent in that respect”, she replied.
Too diligent, thought Jon. Instead of quelling the unrest they have merely stoked the fire.

“A man of similar height and build will be brought to your room this evening. With the aid of a glamour you will, in effect, trade faces with this man. You will be taken to his ice cell while he will remain here until it is time”, she explained further.

Jon remained silent for a few more seconds before leaning forward to speak.

“One thing puzzles me, my lady”, he began. “This man that you propose to burn in my stead lacks a key ingredient…king’s blood. This ceremony is doomed to fail”.

Melisandre turned back to face the fire and nodded.

“I know”, she replied.

Jon breathed a sigh.

“Then why…why this mummer’s farce?” he asked.

“I cannot refuse her…she is my queen”, she explained. “So when her husband remains a lifeless corpse she will collect his ashes, assemble her court and return to Dragonstone where she belongs. And I will have fulfilled my duty”.

“And what if I refuse to cooperate in your little scheme?” asked Jon.

She turned back to him, her blood red lips parted in a smile, and shrugged.

“Then we will use another…a child of royal blood is available to us”, she said. “Perhaps I could comply with the queen’s wishes after all”.

Jon looked startled and took a quick intake of breath.

“You promised Mance that you would protect his son”, he hissed with fury.

She barked out a laugh.

“That child who cries piteously for his mother is not the son of the King Beyond the Wall”, she said, her eyes glittering. “Did you really believe that I would never find out the truth?”

Jon was dumbstruck. Then his eyes widened in disbelief.

“You wouldn’t…surely she wouldn’t allow her own daughter to burn?” he sputtered.

“She would…you know she would”, she said coldly. “It’s a miracle that a child with such an affliction has lived as long as she has…t’would surely be a mercy killing”.

Then she raised her hands as if in supplication and her eyes shone in the light of the burning fire.

“I will convince her that it would be an honour to present such a gift to the Lord of Light”, she said. “A living offering to our lord god will ensure that the darkness will never consume us…that his champion will rise once again to shine a beacon in the night, thus heralding the advent of dawn. A steep but necessary price to pay wouldn’t you agree, Lord Commander?”

He stared unflinchingly at her.

She dropped her hands to her sides and narrowed her eyes.
“And the queen has always been his most obedient servant”, she said evenly. “She will require little persuasion”.

Jon swallowed and nodded.

“Likewise you have persuaded me”, he whispered hoarsely. “I’ll not have the blood of an innocent child on my hands”.

She clasped her hands together in a pious manner.

“Then you, too, shall be obedient to our lord god until he has need of you”, she said.

“Why me?” asked Jon. “I’m a man who is still faithful to the old gods so why are you so convinced that your god wants me to follow him?”

She stared at him for a few seconds before shifting her gaze to the fire.

“When I look into the fires, I beg my lord god to show me his champion”, she said softly. “And do you know what he shows me…snow. I believe that it is you he shows me. I believe that the Lord of Light has great plans for you, Lord Commander. I believe that you will be his champion…the one to bring light back into this dark world. So I cannot let you die. I now know that it was a mistake on my part to believe that Stannis was the chosen one but my eyes are now open and I see your worth”.

Jon licked his lips and nodded slightly. She was beyond reason and yet very much in control.

After she left, Jon returned to his cot for a while and listened to the rasping of saws and the pounding of hammers coming from the yard as the cage was being built. His stomach twisted slowly into a knot and he broke out into a light sweat. He felt like a man condemned to die although he knew otherwise.

A bowl of food by his bedside remained untouched. He would have fed it to Ghost if he knew where the direwolf had disappeared to…he had not returned to Jon’s room since the arrival of the guards stationed outside his door.

They brought the condemned man to Jon’s room just as the sun was slipping below the horizon. Jon searched the man’s face looking for signs of evil intent but could find evidence of none. He was a most ordinary looking man…listless, half starved with eyes that appeared to stay open with some reluctance.

She has drugged him, thought Jon, as he observed the man’s dilated pupils.

After they traded clothes, Jon offered the man his cold supper. The man ate it quickly, his fingers dancing over the bowl as he scooped up the contents and shoved them into his mouth. The last meal of a dying man, thought Jon soberly.

“Guilt is an overrated emotion, Lord Commander”, whispered the red priestess as she fastened the red ruby bracelet around his wrist.

When the rubies at their wrists began to glow, Jon watched in amazement as the other man’s features began to rearrange themselves. Once the transformation was complete, Jon stared at the man as if looking in a mirror.

Jon was escorted deep below the castle. As he entered the tiny ice cell he was startled to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror of ice. I do not recognize myself…I am a stranger to my own eyes.
While Jon sat shivering on the icy cot, Satin stood in the shadow of Hardin’s tower. His stomach roiled as he watched the condemned man half dragged towards the cage.

Tears stung his eyes as he watched the man begin to resist as he came within a few feet of the cage, shaking and howling with each step. A stain spread across his groin and Satin could see the queen’s men wrinkle their noses in disgust when they realized that their charge had also soiled himself.

Satin hugged himself closer and took a few steps backwards.

He watched the free folk growing increasingly agitated as the queen’s men closed the cage door. The clamour of their voices rose as the red woman raised her arms towards the sky. He watched the queen’s men draw closer around the body of their dead king and his living queen as the crowd pressed forward. And he watched his black brothers as they skirted around the edges of the crowd, shamefaced and defeated looking.

The cries of anguish from the cage hushed the crowd momentarily as they warily watched the man being consumed by the flames.

Satin was slipping further into the shadows when he heard the angry shouts and screams rise above the general din, accompanied by the clash of steel upon steel.

It has begun, he thought, as he broke into a run and sprinted down the corridor that led to the ice cells.

His fingers fumbled with the lock before wrenching open the door and staring, his chest heaving, at the stranger who stood before him. He hesitated for a second before yanking off the glowing red ruby at the man’s wrist and grabbing his hand.

“Come”, he shouted.

As they left the chamber, Jon glanced down the corridor in the direction from which Satin had come.

“What is going on?” asked Jon as his ears detected the faint sounds of a pitched battle echoing in the distance.

“It’s not as if they weren’t warned”, muttered Satin as he tugged impatiently on Jon’s arm.

But Jon stood resolute, refusing to budge.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Satin sighed deeply.

“The queen and her men were warned that if you died then the treaty would be broken”, he explained. “Then they made the situation worse when the queen insisted on burning you in return for the king’s life”.

Jon snorted in frustration.

“Then I should advance to the surface now…show myself to make this madness stop”, he said as he began to move down the corridor.

Satin grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

“No…your presence is not going to change anything at this point”, he said sharply. “The wildlings’ anger had festered long enough…your death merely brought it to a head. If not your burning then...
there would have been another catalyst soon enough to begin the insurrection”.

Jon stood helplessly before him, still staring down the gloomy corridor, the sounds of death and destruction growing louder.

“Come, Lord Commander”, said Satin. “The feelings of guilt that you harbour will resolve nothing. We need to leave now”.

Melisandre’s words echoed in Jon’s head…guilt is an overrated emotion, Lord Commander.

“Where are we going?” asked Jon suddenly.

“Far away from here”, replied Satin as they crept down the corridor.

He led Jon through twists and turns, going deeper into the bowels of the earth. Satin’s torch began to sputter and Jon feared that they would soon be plunged into darkness and would have to find their way through touch.

“What is this tunnel?” asked Jon.

“It is a wormway that the Watch used to receive supplies at the height of winter when the snows piled so high that the gates could no longer be opened. The builders have been clearing it for weeks now in anticipation of winter’s coming”, replied Satin.

The floor under their feet was becoming increasingly slick, forcing them to brace their hands on the icy walls to maintain their balance. Jon stumbled at one point and grabbed at Satin’s arm for support.

After a few more turns Jon, breathing heavily with the pain and exertion, realized that the floor was becoming increasingly steep as they began to slowly climb out of the depths.

As the torch burned down to a glowing ember, Satin pointed to a pinprick of light glowing in the distance with barely concealed excitement.

“Hurry”, whispered Satin. “We’re almost there”.

As they drew closer to the mouth of the tunnel, Jon could see a white spectral figure standing just outside the entrance, beckoning to them silently. Jon’s eyes widened and he slowed his pace until Satin poked him in the back.

“It’s only Val, Lord Commander”, said Satin. “She’s waiting for us with the horses”.

Val held out her arms and wrapped them around Jon’s shoulders when he emerged from the tunnel. She held him so tightly that he thought she might crack one of his ribs.

“I’m so happy you’re safe”, she whispered, her hot breath steaming in the cold night air and tickling his ear.

He felt something brush up against his leg. It was Ghost and his presence was causing the horses to whinny and dance nervously.

As Satin grabbed the reins and brought the horses to heel, he turned his gaze to the sky where the moon hung like a red orb. A blood moon, he observed. He recalled the red woman’s final words as she raised her arms high above her head, standing so close to the flames that he feared she would catch fire…so shall the sun be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, as we eagerly await the return of our saviour.
“Where to?” grunted Jon, mounting his horse gingerly.

“Oakenshield”, replied Val as she nudged her horse with her heels, “where another hungrily awaits your arrival”.

“Who?” asked Jon as he pulled up his horse beside hers.

Val tossed her hair and showed her pearly white teeth.

“Your sister”, she replied with a grin.
Chapter 4

The journey to Oakenshield was slow and arduous, hampered by the rough snows and the blowing winds. They were soon joined at times by ragtag bands of refugees from the carnage at Castle Black who expressed surprise that the Lord Commander still lived but took the revelation in their stride. Being uprooted yet again was becoming part of their daily lives and their prosaic outlook reminded Jon occasionally of Dolorous Edd.

“I reckon the new lot will be no better than the old lot”, sniffed one elderly man who carried his young granddaughter on his back. “Worse, possibly…we didn’t fancy our chances so we fled as soon as we could”.

Jon probed him for news of the fates of those left behind.

“They burned your queen”, cackled the old man. “They shoved her kicking and screaming into the fire and then they tossed in her husband’s dead body after her. She’s nothing but cinder and ash now, I’ll wager”.

Fools, thought Jon. They could have held her hostage and traded her for provisions and gold. Selyse Baratheon was not well-loved but her family, the Florents, might still have paid handsomely for her release.

“And…their child?” asked Jon anxiously.

The old man shook his head.

“I don’t rightly know…she wasn’t present at the burning”, he replied. “But I can’t see anybody wanting to keep her alive…she’s diseased…an abomination”.

Aye, thought Jon, who would care what happened to the poor scarred girl, the sight of whom turned most people to stone…unless they were too frightened to go near her…

“And what of the priestess?” he asked.

Again the man shook his head.

“Lost sight of her during the melee”, he replied. “But if there’s any justice they burned her, too”.

As the horses continued to struggle to keep their footing in the increasingly deep snow, Val kept pace with Jon. At times they rode in companionable silence and other times they chatted amiably while Satin switched positions…sometimes riding out in front to keep watch for danger and other times at the rear so as to join in the conversation.

At Jon’s insistence, Satin no longer addressed him as Lord Commander.

“There is nothing left to be Lord Commander of”, said Jon with a sigh. “The Watch is essentially lost…dead or folded into the life of the free folk”.

“Not necessarily”, countered Satin stubbornly. “We don’t know yet what has happened to the men stationed at Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower. You are still Lord Commander until there is nobody left to command”.

Jon shook his head.
“The Watch as we knew it is doomed”, he said moodily. “The presence of the free folk along the Wall was bound to start a series of chain reactions…out with the old…in with the new. Their needs neatly dovetailed with our own and they outnumbered us. So I would be most grateful if you would call me Jon again…no longer your Lord Commander but still your sworn brother for life”.

Satin smiled and dipped his head.

“As you wish Lord…Jon”, he said as he corrected himself.

“As for you”, said Jon as he turned his head to face Val. “I would appreciate it if you ceased addressing me as Lord Crow”.

Val raised a palm to her breast and looked at Jon in surprise.

“I meant no offense”, she said with mock indignation. “I didn’t realize you were such a delicate flower. I will mend my ways immediately…Jon”.

Jon chuckled and held out a gloved hand to her.

“Thank you kindly, Your Grace”, he replied.

She swatted away his hand and glared at him, clearing her throat loudly before taking up the reins in both hands. Then she kicked at the sides of her horse, urging it to pick up the pace. But the depth of the snow prevented her from outpacing the other two who caught up with her easily.

“I’m sorry”, apologized Jon. “That was a careless attempt at humour. I expect it reminded you of your needless incarceration”.

Val turned back to him with a frown.

“I don’t ken to your kneeler ways, Jon Snow”, growled Val. “So let’s have no more talk of wildling princesses or other such nonsense. For now, we’re just three people on the run, trying to stay alive in a cruel and indifferent world”.

As they plodded along, the skies darkened and the snow began to fall once more, clinging to the trees and entombing them in a ghostly shade of white. Jon suggested that they stop for the night and make a shelter.

Jon assembled the tent while Satin collected the firewood and, before long, had a fire roaring. Val reappeared from the shadows with three dead hares firmly in her grasp, the blood from their slit throats leaving a crimson trail in her wake. Ghost had disappeared in search of his own supper.

After skinning and roasting their meal, they sat huddled together before the fire, clinging to each other for warmth.

Val suddenly began tugging at Jon’s furs, stopping when he glared at her.

“What are you doing, woman?” he asked.

“You’ve been scratching at your wounds all day”, she replied nonchalantly as she produced her knife. “It’s time to take out those stitches before the skin permanently heals over them”.

“Not here”, he hissed.

Val looked around expectantly, an amused expression on her face.
“Why not…do you fear an animal attack?” she asked innocently.

“No”, he replied, “but I fear the cold winter snows on my bare skin”.

“Well, if you’re afraid of a little frostbite then we can do this inside of the tent”, she said as she stood up. She proffered her hand and helped pull him to his feet.

Satin looked up and grinned at the pair of them.

“I’ll take the first watch”, he said as he tossed another stick on the fire.

Once inside the tent, Val assisted Jon in peeling off layers of clothing until she could expose enough of his chest and back. Then she began the painstaking process of removing his stitches.

“Stay still”, she said firmly. “You don’t want me to nick anything vital”.

She started with his neck. As he tilted his head to one side, his chin raised, she cut and tugged at the silk stitches until she was satisfied that they had all been removed. Then she ordered him to lie down on the furs that were spread out on the frozen ground.

Jon lay back with one arm shielding his eyes as he watched Val lean over him, the tips of her hair brushing lightly back and forth against his skin. The candle sputtered and hissed as she moved it closer.

“Here”, she said as she picked up the candle holder and shoved it into his hand. “I can’t seem to get enough light…I need it closer”.

He balanced the candle holder on his chest and watched as the light cast her face into a soft golden glow. Her face was a mask of determination as she peered at the stitches and flicked at them with her knife. Her hand was rough but warm where she placed it on his body. There was an aura about her and Jon was reminded for possibly the hundredth time just how beautiful she was. He held his breath, trying to keep still, so as not to give her cause to abandon her task and leave his side.

She uttered a cry of triumph as she removed the last of the stitches on his belly and then ordered him to roll over on to his stomach. He felt her lift his shirt and then she ran her fingers lightly over his wound.

“This is going to take a little longer”, she whispered. “The skin has already started to close over the silk so it’s going to take a lot of pulling to get it out”.

Jon closed his eyes and braced himself.

“I’m ready”, was his muffled reply.

He was surprised to feel her clamber over him and sit down on his backside to straddle his frame.

“What are you doing?” he asked, lifting his head and twisting to look at her.

“Leverage”, she replied as she bent down with the knife poised in her hand.

Jon screwed up his face but remained silent, except for the occasional grunt, as she removed the stitches on his back. The pressure of lying on his belly and having her sit on him was causing a dull ache to build in his abdomen. But he chose to forebear the discomfort without complaint until she yanked out what felt like the final stubborn stitch.

He expected her climb off him immediately but instead he felt her push his shirt higher, the cool air
causing ripples of goosebumps to rise on his exposed skin. Then he felt her lips graze his spine as they traveled downwards towards the curve of his back. He held his breath once again and felt a stirring in his groin. Seven hells, he thought, is she trying to seduce me…because if she is she’s doing a bloody good job of it.

“All done”, she said suddenly as she rose up and slapped his backside.

He uttered an oath and turned over to find her smiling as she waved her knife through the flame to clean it.

“What was that for?” he asked, mildly outraged.

She shrugged as she sheathed her knife.

“Call it an impulse”, she replied. Then she glanced at his groin. “Though it doesn’t look like it hurt you”.

Jon flushed as his hand instinctively flew to cover up his arousal.

She leaned down until their eyes locked. Then both sets of eyes traveled downward.

“You know”, she said softly, “we can do something about that”.

“My vows…” began Jon.

“Oh sod your vows”, she interrupted. “I’ll wager you broke those vows over and over again when you were with Ygritte. And, as you have rightly pointed out, the Watch appears to be at an end. The Wall is now guarded by those who have more to lose than a flock of beady-eyed crows”.

She moved closer to him until their lips almost touched.

“I know you swore those vows before a tree, Jon…but the trees don’t care. The gods don’t care. Nobody cares. All that matters is how much I care about you and how much I believe you care about me”, she whispered.

He focused on her lips, mesmerized by their shape…how pink and soft and pliable they were despite the bracing cold. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. Then she threw her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, until he yowled when her fingers dug into the wound on his neck.

“Sorry”, she said as she ran her lips over the raised scar. “I promise to be gentler with you”.

Satin was dozing by the fire when the peals of laughter roused him. Ghost was circling the tent and was about to push through the flap when Satin rose and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

“Come keep me warm, boy”, he said as he guided the direwolf closer to the fire. Ghost settled down into the snow while Satin spread out a fur next to him and then lay down on top of it with his back to the direwolf for comfort. Then he closed his eyes and fell into a light sleep while trying to ignore the moans coming from nearby.

Satin awoke a couple of hours later. The fire was a grey mass dotted with glowing embers and the snow had finally ceased falling. The moon was bright and cast a bluish glow on the newly fallen snow and a sprinkling of stars were spread across the firmament. Ghost had disappeared beneath a blanket of snow, curled up tightly against the cold. Satin rose up on his knees and took a deep frosty breath before brushing away the snow from his coat and leggings.
Ghost began to stir when they heard the eerie sound of a wolf howling in the distance. He shook off the snow after rising up and his ears twitched as he heard the howl again. Satin could see him trying to locate the direction the cry was coming from before he trotted abruptly into the woods, disappearing into the shadows.

“Everyone is coupling except me”, muttered Satin dejectedly as he shook out his fur blanket.

He crawled through the tent flap, dragging his blanket behind him. Jon was snoring peacefully with Val’s head resting on his shoulder. She opened one eye when she heard the rustling sounds and he saw her hand automatically reach for her knife.

“It’s only me”, said Satin, slightly alarmed. “The temperature has dropped off and I’m cold”.

“Then come get warm”, murmured Val sleepily as she lifted the furs.

Satin, gritting his teeth to stop them from chattering, crawled beneath the furs and nestled against her. Then she turned her head and rested her chin atop his head before they both fell back asleep.

They awoke the next morning at first light with Jon stirring first. His arm was numb where Val had laid her head most of the night. After gently disengaging himself he rubbed his arm to restore his circulation while glancing about the tent. The interior was covered in a layer of frost and he felt like a child again when he touched the fabric, turning the frost into tiny rivers of water that criss-crossed and flowed to the ground. He smiled to himself before turning to shake his sleeping companions awake. He estimated that they were only a day’s ride from Oakenshield so that if they left shortly they might make it before sundown. After all, he reminded them, a night’s rest on a mattress filled with mouldy straw was preferable to another night on the frozen ground.

As they drew nearer to Oakenshield Jon grew more silent, almost morose. He thought about the last time he saw his little sister, Arya, as they parted ways. He went north with his Uncle Benjen to join the Watch while she went south with their father to Kings Landing where he assumed the duties of the Hand of the King. What happened to her after their father was executed remained a mystery as she seemingly disappeared without a trace until he received news of her engagement to the Bolton bastard.

She’s just a child, muttered Jon under his breath. She was such a spirited little girl…full of life and brimming with energy. Of all the Stark children he had to admit he loved her the most.

The gods know what Bolton might have done to her, brooded Jon. If she’s physically broken then I can help mend her. But if she’s mentally broken…well…Jon almost started to weep at the thought of his little sister drained of all vitality. I pray to all the old gods and new, thought Jon, that she is not lost to me forever.

Val, sensing the change in his mood, reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder as their horses plodded on side by side. He reached up to take her gloved hand in his and kissed the fingertips before giving her hand a squeeze.

“She’ll be happy to see you no matter what”, she assured him.

Jon nodded and gave her a small smile.

They reached Oakenshield just as the sun paused briefly behind the hillocks of snow, bathing the smooth mounds in hues of pink and gold, as it made its descent. They could hear the shouts of recognition from the sentries on the wall and within minutes the gates groaned open.

They were met by Soren Shieldbreaker and a group of wildlings both familiar and unfamiliar to Jon.
but known to Val whom they greeted with fierce hugs.

“We have housed your sister with a group of spearwives who have taken her under their wing”, said Soren as they approached one of the towers. He glanced at Satin before leaning in conspiratorially towards Jon.

“She’s a bit skittish around men but I reckon he’ll pass…he’s not as rough as some of them around here”, he said in a low voice. “He could almost pass for a woman hisself”.

Jon chuckled. Satin’s prettiness often led others to underestimate his strength and skill.

When the door to her quarters opened, the spearwife who answered the door stared boldly at the trio who stood before her. Then she turned and spoke to the girl who sat in a shadowy corner of the room.

“He’s here”, said the spearwife curtly.

“Thank you”, replied the girl softly. “It’s all right…I’ll be safe with them”.

The spearwife nodded before pushing past Jon, Val and Satin who stood awkwardly in the door frame.

“Arya?” asked Jon as he tried to make out the girl’s features. He felt ungainly and out of place…he wanted to rush at her and embrace her but he feared he might overwhelm her with affection.

“Close the door, Jon”, she said.

Satin latched the door while Jon watched the girl rise from her seat and emerge into the candlelight.

Jon was dumbfounded. The girl who stood before him was pretty and dainty with dark hair and sad, beseeching brown eyes. She looked familiar but one thing was clear…she wasn’t Arya.

“Who are you?” he asked as his eyes narrowed.

The girl took a couple of hesitant steps forward while he stumbled backwards. Val caught him and hung on to his arm.

“Hear her out”, she hissed. “Maybe she knows where your sister is”.

Satin stood loyally beside him, quickly assessing the situation and watching the girl’s face carefully as she and Jon stared at each other. Then the tension drained from Jon’s face as he realized who she was.

“I do know you”, said Jon. “You’re Jeyne Poole…Vayon Poole’s daughter and Sansa’s friend”.

The girl let out a sob and ran towards Jon. He held her close and stroked her hair as she drenched his chest with her tears. Then he turned to Val with a look of bewilderment on his face and shook his head. He had so many questions he scarcely knew where to begin.

Jeyne was hiccuping as Val led her back to her chair and produced a cup of water which Jeyne drank greedily. Then she sat next to Jeyne and held her hand while the girl brushed away her tears with a handkerchief.

“Sit down, Jon”, said Val sharply, “you’re making her nervous”.

Jon reluctantly perched on the edge of the narrow cot and folded his arms while Satin stood next to
him like a silent sentry.

“Why?” asked Jon. “Why are you impersonating Arya…what could you possibly gain trying to pass yourself off as my sister?”

Jeyne shook her head violently as if to shake loose some horrible memories.

“It wasn’t my idea”, she gasped. Then she told him her horrific tale of incarceration, rape, beatings and finally a trumped up marriage to Ramsay Bolton while being forced to pose as Arya Stark in order to help strengthen the alliance with the Lannisters and tighten the Boltons’ hold on the north.

“He locked me away and made me…do things”, she whispered, her eyes haunted with the recollection. “Horrible, horrible acts that I swore I would never repeat to anyone”.

Jon nodded. I won’t ask now but I may need to coax details from her later, he decided.

“Then how did you get away?” he asked.

She twisted the handkerchief anxiously.

“There was this singer who helped me escape”, she whispered.

Jon glanced at Val who mouthed the name “Mance”. He nodded in agreement.

“Do you know what happened to him?” asked Jon.

She shook her head.

“No…no, I’m not sure if he’s alive or dead”, she replied.

She looked at Jon with desperation and fear in her eyes.

“And Theon…Theon Turncloak…he helped me break free”, she blurted out. “We jumped off the wall of Winterfell and the snows broke our fall”.

Jon looked at her in surprise. Theon’s whereabouts had been a mystery since the Ironborn sacked Winterfell.

“And where is he now?” asked Jon, unconsciously cracking his knuckles. Because, he thought, when I find him then I am going to throttle him with my bare hands for his betrayal of Robb.

“I…I don’t know. He fled when I was picked up by King Stannis’ men”, she replied.

Jon unfolded his arms and looked at Val. She leaned over to speak to Jeyne.

“Did they bring you back with Stannis’ body?” she asked gently. Jeyne nodded dumbly.

“Why didn’t they bring you directly to see me at Castle Black?” asked Jon.

“I wanted to see you right away but the red priestess ordered them to remove me to Oakenshield”, she replied. “She said that you would join me here”.

Jon bowed his head slightly and marveled at the cunning of the woman who always seemed to be two steps ahead. He wouldn’t be a bit surprised if she had an escape plan in place when the burning ceremony went awry.
“Do you…do you know where Arya is?” asked Jon. “Do you know where Sansa is?”

Jeyne looked at him briefly, tears flooding her eyes once more, before shaking her head.

“No…sorry but no”, she said in a small voice.

She reached out to him, almost touching his face.

“Please forgive me”, she said.

Jon drew back in astonishment.

“What for?” he asked.

“For not being Arya”, she replied as she daubed at her eyes.

They left her on her own, still crying over all that she had lost and endured. The spearwives that stood outside her door looked at Jon with some sympathy in their eyes. They appeared to have guessed the truth, having spent much time in Jeyne’s company.

“We’ll continue to take care of her”, one of them said. “She’s no longer your concern”.

Jon stiffly offered his thanks and left them to their ministrations. And yet he still felt a smidgeon of responsibility for Jeyne’s situation…if she hadn’t grown up along with the Starks then she might not have suffered the same fate. But then he knew he had to shake off his latent feelings of guilt yet again.

Soren had them shown to their rooms for the duration of their stay...however long that might be.

“What next?” asked Val as she sank down on the bed next to Jon.

He leaned forward, his arms resting on his thighs and staring at the fire that burned low on the grate.

“Winter has come”, he replied. “We need to shore up our defenses, double the watch and take in extra provisions. We can discuss this in more detail once Tormund returns”.

If he returns, thought Jon grimly. The reports from Hardhome hadn’t been hopeful.

“And what do you really want to do?” she asked as she linked her arm around his.

He glanced at her, his face hard and sullen.

“I want to take an army south and take back Winterfell. And then I want to take the Bolton bastard’s head for what he did to Jeyne…for what he believed he was doing to my little sister”.

“Well then…” said Val. “I guess we better get started”. 
Chapter 5

Jon was patrolling the southern wall with Satin when he heard the distant sound of a warhorn. He tensed up as he searched the surrounding countryside but could see nothing at first.

“Go warn Soren”, he said to Satin as he laid his hand on Longclaw’s pommel.

After Satin had left to find the wildling leader, Jon paced the wall, pausing only for brief moments to confer with the other wildlings who were peering into the distance, trying to find a clue to the horn blower’s identity.

The warhorn blew again…this time two blasts were heard. A crowd was beginning to gather on the wall and Jon could hear the ominous rasp of axes being sharpened. Val suddenly appeared at his shoulder.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know”, replied Jon, flexing his sword hand.

Val shrugged off the bow that had been slung over her shoulder and pulled an arrow from the quiver at her back.

“Wait”, said Jon, holding up one hand as some figures began to emerge from the trees. The lead figure raised a horn to his lips and blew it again. Others followed him out of the woods, many limping and staggering towards the southern gate. There were shouts and cries from the agitated wildlings as they nocked their arrows and drew them back in anticipation.

The advancing party halted and the lead figure raised his hands as if surrendering.

“Whoa…what the fuck are you doing?” shouted the man. “It’s me, you fools…I haven’t been gone that long that you’ve forgotten me already…har”.

Jon and Val simultaneously let out a sigh of relief.

The gates had been wrenched open to receive Tormund and his men just as Jon and Val arrived to greet them.

The new arrivals looked weary and drawn. Many sported injuries that had been hastily bound up with heavily soiled rags, leaning on their fellows for support. Others staggered towards their loved ones weeping openly…battle hardened veterans who could no longer hold back a flood of tears. And then there were those who remained stoically silent…who threw themselves on the ground in exhaustion and buried their faces in their knees.

Jon looked at Tormund with a question in his eyes. Tormund shook his head silently in reply.

“Nobody?” asked Jon incredulously.

Tormund threw his arm around Jon’s shoulder.

“Give us some food and ale first, lad, and then I’ll tell you a tale that’ll give you a few grey hairs”, said Tormund jovially. But Jon could see that the spark of life that used to burn bright in Tormund’s eyes had now dimmed.

Haunted, thought Jon, they all look haunted. As if what they saw would be forever etched in their
memories.

In the kitchen, Tormund leaned back in his chair and let out a long belch. Then he raised his tankard of ale once more to his lips and downed it all in one go.

“Har…I needed that”, he said as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he pushed his cup along the table towards Satin.

“Give us some more…there’s a good lad”, he said. Satin glanced at Jon before pouring more ale into the cup. This was Tormund’s fifth cup of ale in a short space of time and he was becoming louder and more profane by the minute.

Jon was about to speak when Val dropped a bowl of goat stew on to the table in front of Tormund.

“Get that down your neck before you have any more to drink”, she said sharply as she pushed his cup out of reach. “We want to know what happened before you’re too sozzled to care”.

“Aye”, replied Tormund, suddenly looking deflated. “Give me a second to muster up the words”.

He took up his spoon and gulped down a couple of mouthfuls of stew before he began his story.

“The snows were falling so fast and heavy that many a time we considered turning back”, he said. “But every time I considered it I thought of my promise to you, Jon. When we reached Hardhome it was bleak and barren. The ships in the harbour listed from side to side, some of them partially submerged and all of them empty. We found some dories on the shore and rowed out to board the ships to find nothing but ghosts, boy. There was no sign of life anywhere. And the only sounds we could hear were the sloshing of the waves and wind whistling past the deck. So, after abandoning the ships we rowed back to shore and headed towards the cliffs…towards the caves”.

Jon nodded. He knew about the screaming caves where it was told that blood-curdling shrieks could be heard but there was no living creature to be found within.

Tormund paused to scrub his face and scratch at his beard. Then he took another bite of food and looked at his cup of ale longingly. Val looked at him with sympathy in her eyes and pushed the cup closer.

“You’re a good lass”, said Tormund before taking another swig of ale.

Then he set the tankard down and stared off into middle distance. Satin recognized that look…the look of a man who has witnessed unspeakable horrors…the limp, blank unfocused gaze of a battle weary soldier. Veterans of the Night’s Watch had dubbed it the thousand-yard stare.

“Darkness was falling as we climbed the cliffs to search the caves for survivors. But all we could find were human bones piled up…row upon row…all neatly arranged by size and type. The piles were four feet high and six feet deep in parts, with grinning skulls lined up on top. It’s…it’s like they were ossuary trophy rooms forming a kingdom of the dead. Somebody or something was trying to warn us…leave now because there is nothing for you but death in this cursed place”.

He took another gulp of ale.

“But it was too late. We turned around in one cave to find dead things crowding in on us. Axes wouldn’t stop ‘em…knives couldn’t stop ‘em. They tore into us…striking us down as if we dolls, mere playthings. Then I remembered your words, Jon, and I struck out with a torch…setting them ablaze gave us an opening and a few of us made our escape”.

“"
He looked around at his audience which was growing as others came to hear his tale.

“But freedom was fleeting as more dead things stumbled out of the woods…rose out of the water and waded ashore. Then the white bastards themselves, astride on their stinkin’ steeds, brandished their icy swords as they emerged from the icy mist that crawled along the shoreline. The wind picked up and the temperature dropped until it was so cold that our limbs stiffened and our tongues stuck to the roofs of our mouths. We felt frozen in time. Then we heard the guttural shriek that spurred us into action. As the wights advanced on us we inched along the cliff wall until we found a cave opening that was separate from the others. We could hear water rushing in the distance so we stumbled further into the darkness, keeping our ears cocked as the noise grew louder with every step. After squeezing through a narrow passageway we found ourselves in a cavern at the bottom of which flowed a river. We feared the wights were still in pursuit so without further thought we jumped into the water and let it carry us along for a piece. We fought our way out of eddies and struggled to stay afloat and away from the jagged edges that lined the banks. We were past the point of exhaustion when we saw a light glowing in the distance so using the last bit of our strength we swam until we reached the mouth which poured into the sea”, said Tormund, miming the actions of a swimmer paddling furiously as a final flourish.

He wet his whistle one more time as all eyes were fixed on him.

“After hauling ourselves out of the water we were disoriented and so bloody, fuckin’ cold”, he continued. “So we built ourselves a nice big bonfire to dry ourselves off and then searched for the stars so we could guide ourselves home”.

“How many did you lose?” asked Jon softly.

Tormund stared into his cup for a few seconds before replying.

“Too many”, he mumbled.

“I’m so sorry”, said Jon as he laid a hand on Tormund’s shoulder. He knew that now was not the time to ask for Tormund’s support in launching an assault on Winterfell so he patted his shoulder and pushed back his chair.

One by one everyone drifted away, making excuses about having to resume their duties and mumbling their condolences as they passed by. Tormund nodded in acknowledgement as he continued to down his ale.

That evening a memorial for the dead was hastily arranged after the evening meal. At first it was a morose affair. Some people sat with tears streaming down their faces as testimonials were offered while others drowned their sorrows in drink. The mood lightened when the musicians amongst them pulled out their instruments and began to play a series of laments…until one drunken man piped up.

“Ah…for pity’s sake will you please play something joyful”, he slurred.

The musicians glanced at each other before striking up a reel. A few brave souls ventured out on to some open space amidst the tables to kick up their heels. Within minutes the tables had been pushed back and more couples joined hands with those who were already dancing.

Jon sat on the sidelines with a cup of ale clutched in one hand. He watched Val dance a jig, looking flushed and happy as she skipped and kicked in three quarter time. When the music stopped she bowed to her partner and headed towards Jon. She flopped down next to him on the bench, her chest still heaving, and lifted her heavy braid off the back of her neck to cool off.
“Now will you dance with me?” she asked.

“No”, replied Jon into his cup.

“And why not?” she demanded.

“Not drunk enough”, he replied although he was looking decidedly glassy eyed.

She reached over and took the cup from his hand and emptied the contents on to the floor before setting it down by her side. Then she stood up and offered her hand to him.

“C’mon then”, she said with a jerk of her head.

She could tell by the resigned look on his face that she had won this battle. He reluctantly rose unsteadily to his feet and took her hand. She led him on to the dance floor just as the band was beginning to play a fling. Jon tried to back away but Val hauled him back with both hands and shoved him into a group of other dancers.

“Follow my lead”, she whispered into his ear as she grabbed one of hands and placed it firmly on her hip while the other she held aloft. They lurched about the dance floor with Jon muttering apologies as they bumped into the other dancers.

“You really are a terrible dancer”, she said as they finished the dance with hands clasped above their heads.

“I did try to warn you”, said Jon as he led her off the dance floor amidst the whistles and the hollers.

He caught Tormund’s eye briefly before he sat down again. Tormund glanced at Val and nodded while raising his cup in approval.

They sat out a couple of more dances together until a young man, so young that Jon estimated that his voice had barely finished changing, nervously asked Val to join him in another jig.

She graciously accepted and allowed him to lead her on to the dance floor. While Jon was watching them with some amusement as the young man gamely tried to keep up with her, he failed to see Soren heading in his direction.

“Havin’ a good time, then?” asked Soren after sitting down next to Jon. Soren was a tall, raw-boned young man with sandy blond hair and a pleasant, open face. At first brush, he appeared to be a genial giant but Jon knew of his fearsome reputation if you met him in a fight.

Jon turned to him and nodded.

“It’s not bad this”, he replied, smiling back at Val as she waved at him.

Then he caught Soren staring across the room at a young woman who was clearly trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. She glanced in his direction briefly before lowering her gaze demurely and turning to talk with the woman who stood frowning next to her. Soren turned back to Jon.

“I’ve heard from Val that you’re still planning on marching on Winterfell”, said Soren. “I want to come with you”.

Jon was pleased by the offer but wondered why he cared.

“It will be more a raid than a full-fledged assault”, explained Jon. “I doubt Tormund will be able to spare many more people in light of the disaster at Hardhome”.
Soren ducked his head for a second then raised it again, fiddling with his hands as he stared at the girl once more.

“Do you like her?” asked Jon.

Soren blushed and nodded.

“Sorry”, he mumbled.

“Why?” asked Jon.

Soren let out a slow sigh.

“Well…she is your sister”, he replied. “She’s way too fine a lady for the likes of me”.

Jon decided to let him off the hook.

“She’s not my sister”, he said bluntly.

Soren turned to him in surprise.

“But I was told…” he said, his mouth agape.

“A dear family friend, nothing more”, explained Jon.

Soren straightened up a little for a few seconds before sinking down as if he had been deflated.

“But…she’s still highborn, I reckon”, he said.

Jon shook his head and smiled.

“I doubt that matters very much to her anymore”, said Jon as he laid an arm across Soren’s shoulders.

Soren beamed at Jon before returning his gaze to Jeyne who glanced back at Soren. Then she covered her mouth and leaned over to whisper to her companion.

Jon patted Soren on the shoulder and jerked his chin in Jeyne’s direction.

“Go ask her to dance”, said Jon encouragingly.

“What if she says no”, replied a nervous Soren.

Jon shrugged.

“Then linger for a while and try to chat her up. Let her become more comfortable with you”, said Jon. “She’s been through a very bad patch with men and it’s going to take her a long time to trust them again”.

Soren listened carefully, hanging on to every word. Then he appeared to screw up his courage, wiping his hands on his thighs before rising to his feet.

Jon caught his hand before he could cross the floor.

“Tell her she has a pretty name”, said Jon, recalling his lessons with Sansa on how to talk to girls. “Compliment her on her dress and tell her how flattering the colour is…but just don’t try to steal her. That’s not how it’s done south of the Wall”.

Soren laughed as Jon released his hand and then walked determinedly in Jeyne’s direction just as Val arrived.

“He has his work cut out with that one”, she whispered as she watched him approach Jeyne. “She’s truly damaged from what I’ve heard”.

“He might just care enough to help repair her”, replied Jon.

Val murmured a low hum and tapped her toes in time to the music.

“You two must have talked about more than just his interest in Jeyne, I’ll wager”, she suddenly said.

Jon nodded.

“He has volunteered to go on a raid with me to Winterfell”, replied Jon as he watched Soren lead a timid Jeyne out on to the dance floor. “And now I think I understand why”.

Val leaned her head on Jon’s shoulder and slipped her hand into his.

“I’m tired”, she said. “Are you tired?”

Jon smiled and squeezed her hand.

“Aye…let’s call it a night”, he replied. He stood up and pulled her to her feet. She paused to smooth out the folds of her grey, homespun dress.

“I notice you didn’t compliment me on my dress”, she pouted as she linked her arm with his.

“I wasn’t aware that such words were required at this point in of our relationship”, he said as they strode towards the door.

She stopped suddenly and pulled him towards her.

“Just because I let you share my bed doesn’t mean that such words are no longer desired”, she whispered with a smile dancing on her lips.

He pulled her closer, clasping both her hands to his chest.

“In that case”, he replied, “then I will remind you just how lovely and perfect you look in that dress when I pull it off you tonight”.

Most of the men that Val had been with in the past had been rough and overly eager. They were too focused on pushing aside her smallclothes and shoving themselves inside her to worry about her pleasure. Jarl had been different…sweet, clumsy but keen to learn. And that is why she knew she had to steal him.

And that is how she felt about Jon…except Jon apparently had little left to learn.

She let him undress her that night, unfastening the ties on her dress with practiced hands and slipping it off her creamy shoulders. He dipped his head and left a trail of kisses down her neck and arm before tossing the dress to the floor. Then he scooped her up gently and laid her on the narrow bed. He untied the ribbons on her stockings and slowly rolled them down until her thighs were exposed. Then he tugged off her smallclothes and spread her thighs wide before lying down between them on his belly.

Val raised her arms over her head and lay back in bliss as Jon pressed kisses along her inner thigh.
until he reached her mound. Then he parted her curls and she felt his tongue probe her until he found just the right spot…the one that elicited an instant jolt and then a gasp.

“They should write a song about your tongue”, she cried in between whimpers of pleasure. Then it struck her as rather funny that a man who normally held his tongue, who used his words so sparingly, should prove to be so generous in using it for sexual gratification.

When she peaked quickly with a crescendo of cries, her hands flew to her groin to press down on her mound in order to prolong the pleasure. Jon then pulled himself up, caressing her breasts and taking her nipples in his mouth, his tongue swirling around them as she tossed and moaned.

She reached down to massage his length and stroke his balls before spreading her legs once more and guiding him in. She was slick and warm as he slid into her. As he slowly began to move in and out of her as she felt the pressure build in her belly once more. When she reached her peak for the second time, his thrusts quickened and became more erratic. Within seconds he had spilled his seed within her with a groan before collapsing on top of her.

She cradled him in her arms and stroked his dark curls as he panted lightly. She was silently grateful to Ygritte for teaching him so well. But she was unwilling to thank her aloud out of fear that his dead lover would become a spectral presence between them.

“I’m glad I stole you”, she whispered fiercely.

He lifted his head and peered at her.

“How do you work that out?” he asked, his brows knit together.

“Well…” she replied, “I held a knife to you and then you gave in to me willingly”.

Jon chuckled before rolling off her.

“Using that logic I could make the argument that Satin stole me since he’s the one who released me from the ice cell”, he said.

He would gladly steal you at any time, thought Val, if he was sure that you would accept his love.

She knew why Satin spent so many hours manning the walls of Oakenshield and it made her heart ache to see him isolate himself from the two of them.

“We should bring Satin with us on the raid”, she said as she rose from the bed to retrieve her nightrail.

Jon grabbed his night clothes from the chair.

“What do you mean “we”?” he asked in a muffled voice, pulling his shirt over his head.

When he finished shrugging on his shirt, he found Val glaring at him.

“Satin and I made a pact…wherever you go, we go…and I intend to honour my oath”, she replied as she slid under the furs and rolled over.

Jon was left shaking his head in bemusement, wondering how he had earned such devotion from the two of them.

“And, what’s more…” she declared as she lifted her head and turned to face him again, “I intend to find him a companion so he’ll stop mooning after you”.


Jon was startled…he had no clue that his former steward felt that way about him.

“Are you sure?” he asked, wondering, if it was true, how he could have been so blind? He knew of Satin’s history of working in the pleasure houses which is why he made him his steward…to make it clear to those who disapproved of his past that they would have to answer to the Lord Commander if anything unfortunate should befall his steward.

“Quite sure”, was her muffled reply.

“Is being a matchmaker really one of your better skills?” he asked, trying to sound disingenuous so as not to arouse any hostility.

“Go to sleep, Jon”, she replied with a yawn. “We’ll talk again in the morning”.

“I’m sorry, son”, said Tormund, looking uncomfortable. “But in light of what we witnessed at Hardhome I can only spare a few “.

Jon’s mouth tightened and he nodded.

“Aye, I understand”, he replied before letting out a slow, deep breath. “But I have to admit I had hoped for more”.

Tormund reached out and laid a weathered hand on Jon’s arm.

“And I understand your thirst for vengeance, Jon…truly I do”, he said. “I understand your desire to take back your father’s lands, to avenge your brother’s death and make the bastard pay for what he did to Jeyne while believing her to be your sister. But a cold wind is blowing from the north and we all know what it’s bringing. So heed your family’s words, lad, and please reconsider this…this ill-timed mission”.

Jon stared at the toes of his boots for a few seconds before nodding curtly. Then, without further word, he turned and left the room to seek out Val. He found her in the forecourt fletching arrows.

“Well?” she asked as she smeared the sticky pine rosin on the tip of the shaft.

“Just over thirty”, replied Jon with a sigh as he knelt down beside her. He passed her an obsidian arrow head which she stuck on the end of the shaft and held it firmly in place.

She shrugged.

“Well…we won’t be storming the gates of Winterfell with those numbers”, she said.

Jon was silently brooding while Val reached for the black and grey feathers she had collected.

“Tormund thinks it’s a bad idea to go south at this time”, grumbled Jon.

Val flicked at the feathers, trimming them to her preferred length.

“He’s right”, she said while examining the arrow before tossing it on to a pile with the others.

When Jon didn’t reply she leaned over.

“But that doesn’t mean we still shouldn’t go”, she whispered. “It’s beginning to drive me mad all this watching and waiting. The atmosphere around here is getting so thick that people have taken to starting fistfights just to relieve the tension”.

“So…you’re still coming with me?” asked Jon in surprise.

Val smiled as she picked up another shaft.

“Of course, you daft beggar”, she said. “You’re my man, Jon, and I’m your woman. We look out for each other”.

Jon was now staring off into the middle distance. Val had never known a man before who lived so much of the time inside his head.
“I can tell you’re already forming a new strategy”, she commented.

Jon nodded absently.

“We’re going to have to use stealth and cunning to make up for the lack of numbers”, he murmured. Then he stood up abruptly.

“Where are you going?” asked Val as she set aside her arrow.

“To see Jeyne”, he replied.

Val stared after him as he strode away, shaking her head as she returned to her fletching.

Jon grabbed Satin just as he was descending the wall from his shift on watch.

“Come with me”, said Jon. “I need a second pair of eyes and ears”.

One of Jeyne’s spearwife companions answered the pounding on the door.

“What do you want?” hissed the spearwife, opening the door just a crack.

“We need to speak to Jeyne”, replied Jon. “It’s on a matter most urgent”.

The woman regarded them with suspicion before swiveling her head towards Jeyne who came into view. Jeyne nodded to her.

“She’s feeling poorly so make it quick”, said the woman as she opened the door wider.

Jon and Satin pushed their way past her and accepted Jeyne’s offer to take a seat.

“What is it that you need of me?” she asked as she smoothed out the folds of her gown.

“Information”, replied Jon. “I need to know, apart from the Boltons, who was at Winterfell before you escaped”.

Jeyne squeezed her eyes shut, hesitating briefly before listing off the names of lords and ladies who were guests at her wedding. Jon recognized some as having little or no love for the Starks but the others present, presumably still trapped at Winterfell due to the heavy storms that had been pounding the north relentlessly, gave him pause.

He coaxed a few more details from Jeyne before thanking her profusely for her time and left her to the company of her women.

“What do you think?” asked Jon suddenly as he and Satin rounded a corner.

Satin furrowed his brow and stared at the sooty ceiling.

“If we can find a safe way in it’s possible”, he said cautiously. “But there are still many unknowns”.

“Aye”, replied Jon softly. “We shall have to be very careful about finding our footing before we strike”.

They struck out at first light two days later on sturdy, shaggy pack horses laden down with food and other necessities. Jon lost the argument with Tormund over the amount of provisions they were carrying with Tormund insisting that he make up for the lack of men and women he was able to provide.
“It wouldn’t do to arrive half-starved now would it”, he said with his hands braced on Jon’s shoulders. Then he embraced Jon in a bear hug and slapped on his back before pushing him away.

As Jon sat astride his horse, shielding his eyes against the bright morning sun glinting off the fresh snow, he saw Jeyne appear out of the corner of his eye. He glanced at Soren who was raising his hand in farewell to her. She waved back shyly before turning back inside, her shawl gripped tightly around her shoulders.

“Love’s young dream”, murmured Val as she mounted her horse. “He’s making inroads faster than I expected”.

Jon glanced at Soren’s beaming face before urging his horse towards the gate.

Although the sun shone brightly, there was little warmth in its rays. The winds swept across the fields, creating miniature maelstroms that twirled and danced on the surface of the snow. The riders, wrapped up tightly in their furs, bowed their heads and plunged on heedless of the weather.

They made sure to stop and set up camp just as the sun began to set. As they huddled by the fire warming their hands with cups of heated drink, Ghost would often disappear into the woods, reappearing just as they were striking camp the next day.

“Where does he go at night?” asked Val, her fingers curled around Jon’s bicep.

Jon stared into the gloaming beyond the trees and shook his head.

“I don’t know…but as long as I can still sense him I don’t worry”, he replied.

He leaned over to kiss her lips.

“It’s time we were abed”, he whispered.

They arose and made their goodnights and retreated to their tent. After some fumbling beneath their furs, with both of them trying to be as discreet as possible, they soon fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Jon was aware that he was panting heavily as he plowed swiftly through the deep snows. He could hear her cries in the night and the pounding in his chest. So close this time, he thought, so close, so close. He caught his foot in a snow laden branch and tumbled into a snowdrift. He whimpered as he silently cursed his clumsiness, stretching out his leg to shake it out. Then he limped along for a few more steps and paused when he heard her mournful cry once more in the night. He opened his mouth and called out silently to her…I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m coming. He tried to ignore the ache in his leg as he pushed on.

He sat up in the darkened tent and looked at Val curled up next to him. The pale blue moonlight peeked through the flap and he could just make out the mist coiling around his head as he breathed in and out rapidly. He lowered his face into his hands and rubbed his eyes.

Val rose up on her elbow and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Jon shook his head and lowered himself beside her.

“Tis nothing”, he replied. “Just another wolf dream…go back to sleep now”.
She reached out to touch his face, tracing the scars around his eyes.

“They’re not dreams, Jon”, she whispered. “They’re another reality”.

She heard him take a swift intake of breath and let it out slowly.

“Would you believe about?” he asked, the guardedness palpable in his voice.

She leaned forward.

“You’re a warg, Jon…a skinchanger”, she explained. “I know you’ve spent more than your nights ranging through the woods in the body of your wolf. I’ve seen a look pass over your eyes…a flicker on the face and then you would go completely still for a few seconds…a few minutes… occasionally longer. Sometimes I would call out to you…but deep down I knew it was in vain because you were gone from me. So I waited patiently for you to return”.

She felt him begin to turn away from her so she reached out to grab his face.

“Listen to me”, she said fiercely. “The blood of the First Men flows as freely through your veins as it does mine. Is it any surprise that you have this gift? Because, make no mistake about it, Jon…this is a gift, not a curse. You must not squander it so learn to use it wisely”.

She felt his face fall as her hand slid down and rested on his chest.

“I truly believe that your ability to realize and harness this power is going to be our salvation”, she said as she slipped her hand inside his shirt.

Jon uttered an oath.

“Strewth, Val, your hand is freezing”, he complained.

“Then help warm it up”, she said smoothly as her hand slid down to his belly. He leaned forward and brushed her lips with his.

“If your hand travels any further south it will find warmth soon enough”, he chuckled as he nuzzled her neck.

The moment was broken by a chorus of wolves howling in the distance. They both glanced up.

“Your brethren are calling to you, Jon”, whispered Val, lowering her gaze. “How will you answer their call?”

She felt him take a deep breath as if prepared to speak up when they heard a high pitched lonely sound in the night.

“That sounded human”, said Jon as he lurched forward.

He scrambled out of the tent with Val close behind him. They stood together searching the shadows but they could see nothing other than the stillness of the moon glowing on the glistening snow. The fire continued to crackle, its flames reduced to desultory jets of yellow flame. All around them they could hear the faint sounds of snoring coming from the other tents while a snowy owl hooted indignantly from its perch in a nearby spruce tree.

The wind whistled past the bare branches of the trees, rattling the last bits of foliage that clung to them stubbornly.
“Nothing”, muttered Jon after a few more minutes of straining and staring.

They reluctantly retired once again to their tent but slept poorly, alert to every small sound that echoed through the darkness.

In the morning, Jon gathered his small band around him.

“We are now on the edge of my father’s lands and so, subsequently, we are about to enter enemy territory”, he said as he unfurled a deerskin map on the ground, anchoring it with charred pieces of wood plucked from the ashes of the dead fire.

“First, we’re going to fan out in small groups”, he said, accompanied by murmurs from the men and women who drew closer to peer at the map. “Initially all I ask you to do is to watch and observe. We need to understand the habits of the men on watch…the timing of the patrols. Because our numbers are few we are going to have to use subterfuge to gain entry”.

He pointed to the outline of the great castle on the map.

“I have marked a few possible points of entry, each one of which leads to tunnels which run beneath the castle. The problem is I don’t know how well guarded these sally ports are and if they are even accessible due to the heavy snows piled up around Winterfell”.

He looked up and glanced around at the hardened faces before him.

“I can’t emphasize enough how important it is for you to remain out of sight while we engage in this reconnaissance. If you are captured there will be no swift death for any of you…the Boltons prefer to flay their enemies. They’ll remove your skin inch by agonizing inch until your guts are hanging low and spilling to the ground”.

Some of them swallowed anxiously while others remained stony faced in their resolve.

“We’ve faced their kind before”, said Soren quietly.

Jon nodded and reached down to roll up the map.

“I want to thank all of you again for accompanying me on this journey”, he said.

Soren held out a hand which Jon took in his grasp.

“We all know what it is to lose family”, said Soren. “We’ll not let you face this threat alone”.

Jon gave him a grateful smile.

They straggled into camp just after sundown. Jon was gratified to find that everyone had returned but the reports were not entirely encouraging.

“Either the winter snows have buried them or the Boltons have barred them”, said Satin, “except for one which looks more promising. But we couldn’t get close enough to determine if it’s passable”.

“Why don’t we just cut a few throats and be done with this”, growled Soren. “We’d be in there within two shakes of a lamb’s tail”.

Jon’s eyes flickered towards him.

“Aye…and how long before the alarm is raised”, he replied. “We can’t take and hold this place with these numbers. And how many more would we lose if we had to fight our way further in? No…we
have to find a way in quietlike”.

Soren crossed his arms and his eyes challenged Jon’s.

“And then what?” he asked.

“There’s some still loyal to the Starks on the inside”, replied Jon. “They have men and weapons. Once we reach out to them then we have a fighting chance”.

Soren still looked initially skeptical then his face registered that he had reached a decision.

“Right”, he said as he rubbed his hands together, “I’ll suss out how well guarded that sally port is and let you know”.

Jon caught his arm just as Soren began to turn away.

“No”, said Jon. “I’ll go”.

“It’s too risky”, exclaimed Satin. “Jon…we need you alive or this is all for naught”.

Only Val’s face showed any understanding.

“Aye…it’s time”, she said as she glanced at Ghost.

Jon stared at Ghost for a few seconds before holding out his hand. Ghost trotted over to his side and nuzzled Jon’s hand before Jon reached over to grab him by the scruff of the neck. Then Jon squeezed his eyes shut while Satin watched him with curiosity in his eyes.

After a minute had passed Jon’s eyes popped open and he looked at Val with exasperation.

“I can’t”, he said flatly. “I cannot just will myself to do it”.

She reached out to grasp his hand.

“Yes, you can”, she said. “I’ll wager you were barely more than a babe when you first sat astride a horse. You probably clung to the horse master’s hand as you stared at the ground with fear and apprehension. After a few turns around the yard at Winterfell you most likely started to loosen your grip on his hand as you felt more confident in your seat. Then you took up the reins and pressed your heels against the horse’s flanks as the master continued to keep a steady hand at your back. Later, after a few more lessons, no doubt his hand started to feel like a tether as you yearned to break free and gallop beyond the confines of the yard. So you shook off his hand...you and your horse were ready to journey together as one beyond the walls of Winterfell”.

Her fingers danced lightly on his hand as she loosened her grip.

“You’ve already done this so many times before, Jon…you’re ready…Ghost is ready”, she said softly as she released his hand. “Just… let go”.

Satin watched as Jon’s face slackened, his eyes grew vacant and his body slumped slightly. Ghost’s ears began to twitch violently before turning to Val. She reached out and stroked the direwolf’s head gently.

“We’ll watch over you while you’re gone”, she said. “Stay safe and come back to me”.

The direwolf turned abruptly and raced into the woods, snow spraying in his wake.
Val grabbed Jon’s shoulders and pulled him to the ground, meeting no resistance, and then sat behind him, cradling him in her arms. Satin crouched down beside her.

“What just happened?” he asked, his brows furrowed.

“He warged”, replied Soren bluntly.

Satin stared at Jon with his mouth slightly open.

“Then he has…is he?” he sputtered, trying to get a grasp on the situation.

Val drew Jon closer to her.

“This is just his body”, she replied before jerking her head in the direction of Winterfell. “His spirit…his mind…his essence…resides temporarily inside of Ghost. Hopefully, the guards will only be wary of men approaching their walls, not beasts”.

Jon raced across the fields and ducked under snow laden branches, slowing only when he caught the scent of home. He raised his snout to take in a breath of the crisp, cold air as the breeze swirled around him. Home…he thought…and yet, not home. There were too many unfamiliar odours…rancid, decaying smells redolent of death.

He approached the entry cautiously, relieved to find it only half-buried in the snow that piled up around it. As he moved a little closer he was startled by a cry from above.

“Fucking wolves…I told you they were getting bolder”, came a shout followed by an arrow whirring past his ear. He turned tail and ran as a flurry of arrows flew by him, narrowly missing their mark by mere inches.

The gods damn the Boltons, fumed Jon, for being a suspicious and paranoid lot. They clearly had Winterfell locked up tight. I may have to rethink my strategy.

His heart was pumping furiously and there was a ringing in his ears as ran towards a copse of alders. Within the shelter of their ring the atmosphere was hushed. He listened carefully to the cries coming from the walls, noting after a few minutes that the sounds were receding rather than advancing. The appearance of a lone wolf was clearly more of nuisance than a real threat to the men posted on guard.

He took a few measured steps beyond his refuge and paused with one front paw raised, listening and watching for further signs of danger.

The snap of a twig and a shadow passing out of the corner of one eye raised the hackles on the back of his neck. His eyes narrowed as they scanned the wooded area before him. Another distant snap and he thrust his nose into the air, inhaling it deeply…human.

He kept his ears trained on the direction the sounds were coming from and lowered his nose to the ground. Soon he picked up the fresh scent of his fellow traveler and followed it stealthily, stepping silently through the drifted snows.

He could see the tracks leading to a familiar clearing…the hot springs were located there. Jon recalled fondly how he and Robb spent many hours soaking their tired and aching muscles after a morning of sparring. The tracks were small but definitely not those of a wild animal. Then they abruptly stopped mid-clearing but, upon closer inspection, he could see that the owner of the footprints had taken great pains to erase them by passing a cedar bough over them.

The tracks led to a large boulder that Jon recalled from his childhood…here he and his siblings
would take turns playing king of the castle, with the “king” taunting the others to knock him or her off the perch atop the rock. Some branches were piled up to one side so Jon pawed at them until he uncovered an opening in the ground. He felt a warm, damp breeze wafting up through the hole and he could hear the sound of water trickling beneath his feet.

He pushed his head through the hole and waited a few seconds until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could hear the sound of water flowing in the distance. He placed one paw tentatively in front of his snout and patted at what mercifully felt like firm ground. Then he pushed and shimmied through the hold and felt the opening grow more expansive, enough to accommodate a full grown man. He could see a tunnel descending into the bowels of the earth…packed with wormy earth and roots one had to be careful not to stumble over. Jon kept to one side, sliding along the wall of the tunnel as it slanted ever downwards. As he rounded a curve the air became heavier with humidity and the sound of rushing water filled his ears.

When he entered the cavern it dawned on him where he was…the stuff of legends he thought. He felt prickly and wet but oddly exhilarated at his discovery. Then he turned tail and made the steep ascent back until he broke through to the surface. He briskly shook the water off his coat, shivering briefly before breaking into a run and galloping through the woods at breakneck speed in the direction of the camp.

Val knew that Ghost was close when she felt Jon’s body shudder. He gasped and blinked his eyes rapidly, raising a hand to shield them from the bright light. Val loosened her grip on him when she felt him struggling to rise.

Satin held out a hand to haul Jon to his feet and then supported him for a minute while Jon regained his bearings.

“Well?” asked Val, brushing the snow off her leggings.

“I found a way in”, replied Jon, panting slightly, as he reached down to pat Ghost’s head affectionately as the direwolf brushed past him.
They waded through the warm shallow water while pushing aside the tendrils of roots that reached down from above, straining to reach the waters below. Val sniffed at the air and wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“It smells like spoiled eggs in here”, she declared.

“It smells as dank as a whore’s quim”, joked one of the men, punctuating his remark with a loud “ow” as the spearwife behind him smacked him across the back of his head. He stumbled and lurched forward, rubbing his head ruefully, after she gave him a quick shove.

“It’s the sulphur in the water”, explained Jon, waving his torch back and forth as he kept watch for potential dangers.

Suddenly he stopped and raised one hand, indicating silence. He had felt the cooler air wafting across his face for a brief second so he raised his face and closed his eyes until his nose detected the scent of ancient bones mouldering beneath stone slabs.

He sloshed a few steps further and thrust the torch out before him. In the flickering light he caught sight of the worn granite steps in the recesses of the dirt wall.

“Well?” asked Val as she waded closer to his side.

Jon swallowed before replying.

“The entrance to the great crypt of Winterfell”, he answered hoarsely. He moved closer to the steps and then stood motionless before them, briefly and unexpectedly filled with uncertainty.

“Let’s go”, said Val impatiently. “Surely you’re not afraid of some brittle, dried up old bones, Jon Snow”.

Jon gave her a small smile and shook his head. No, he thought as he began to slowly mount the moss covered steps…the kingdom of the dead was once our playground. It’s just that lately, in my dreams, I fear that I am no longer welcome here.

The air grew chillier as they climbed up to the lowest level of the crypt which housed the oldest of the Stark kings of Winter. Their crumbling statues glared sternly as the interlopers crept past, keeping a firm grip on the swords that they wielded in eternity.

As they climbed the narrow, winding stone steps, the stale, still air was exchanged for fresher, cooler air that slipped under the ironwood door and through the chinks in the masonry. At this point Jon slung his pack to the ground and ordered them to halt and get some rest before continuing to the surface.

“We will have to wait until nightfall before we attempt to leave this place”, he said.

Satin sat down on the dirt floor and began pulling off his soggy boots while Val meandered past the surrounding tombs.

“She must be very special”, she murmured as she paused before the statue of the young woman that stood before her, “being as she’s the only woman in this place full of dead men”.

Chapter 7
Jon wandered over to her side.

“My Aunt Lyanna”, he said quietly as his fingers ran along the rough, worn edges of the stone slab. “My father spoke very little of the circumstances surrounding her death but her monument speaks volumes of his love for her when she lived”.

Ghost was the first to sense its presence. His ears twitched and his eyes narrowed. Then he began to paw at the dirt and pace back and forth as Jon and Val peered anxiously into the black void.

“What is it?” asked Val as she grabbed Jon’s arm.

The light seemed to be floating in the darkness, swaying back and forth as if held by an unseen hand. Jon could hear the mutterings of his companions and the scrape of steel as they drew their weapons.

“Hold steady”, said Jon, raising a hand.

Ghost broke from his side and disappeared into the darkness. Within seconds there was a crash as the light fell to the floor and they were startled by a high pitched shriek.

“Perhaps your aunt has risen from her stony grave and come to join the fray”, said Val sharply after a quick intake of breath.

“Reveal yourself,” shouted Jon.

For a fleeting moment he half-expected to see the specter of a resurrected Lyanna Stark emerging from the shadows. But instead of a ghoul he saw a familiar, albeit older, face appear out of the gloom with Ghost plastered to her side, his tail swishing excitedly from side to side.

“Arya?” he gasped. He felt his chest constrict with fear and joy as he realized that his beloved little sister stood within his reach.

There was a coltish quality to her, a girl on the cusp of womanhood observed Val. She could see a girl with long dark hair and more than a passing resemblance to Jon. But instead of projecting the dewy glow of the young, this girl had eyes that were hard and unflinching…her smile guarded and slightly predatory. Val had seen her type before…young women whose innocence had been taken from them before coming of age. At some point they are forced to make difficult choices to ensure their survival.

“I’m pleased that you were clever enough to follow my breadcrumbs and join me in this adventure, dear brother”, she said as she reached out to Jon.

Jon pulled her into his arms and clung to her tightly, fearful of letting her slip away from him once more.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “We thought you dead”.

“To all intents and purposes I was”, she replied, her voice muffled as she buried her face in his chest.

Then she pulled back and tilted her chin up.

“But now I’m very much alive and ready to take back what is ours”, she whispered fiercely.

They built a small fire to take away the chill and dry themselves off. Then Arya leaned back against Lyanna’s grave and began to spin her tale.

“I returned to the north a few weeks ago after cutting short my apprenticeship”, she said.
“Doing what?” interrupted Jon, leaning forward with interest.

Arya waved her hand dismissively.

“It doesn’t matter”, she replied as a shadow crossed over face, a look that warned him not to ask for more details.

More damn secrets, thought Jon.

“Suffice it to say, I learned enough to know what I had to do”, she continued cryptically. “I found a position in service here with the Boltons…taking pains to disguise myself so they none would suspect that a daughter of Winterfell had returned”.

She paused as she looked down into the dancing flames, her mouth twisting in either anger or grief…possibly both. Then she looked up again.

“I…I know what they did to Jeyne while passing her off as me. I know what they did to everyone we ever knew and loved before claiming our home as theirs”, she said, her hands twisting in her lap.

She took a deep breath, threw back her shoulders and straightened up.

“But I also know who is still loyal to the Starks… who are willing to lay down their lives in order to return the wolves to their rightful place in the north. They and my army currently await my signal for the carnage to begin”, she added.

So…I assume you are here to join us, brother?” she said as she took one of his hands in her smaller ones.

Jon looked at her somewhat skeptically.

“What is the plan, little sister?” he asked.

“Wyman Manderly will be the catalyst”, she said with a smile.

Jon looked surprised.

“Lord Too-Fat-To-Sit-A-Horse?” he asked. He never doubted Lord Manderly’s allegiance to his family… House Manderly might have become a footnote in history if not for the intervention of the Starks. But Lord Manderly was now an old man and in questionable health.

Arya nodded.

“His support for the Boltons has been nothing but a ruse”, she replied with satisfaction written on her face.

She leaned forward and whispered almost conspiratorially.

“He has been quietly sowing dissent amongst the Boltons and the other guests…pitting them against each other until their nerves are jangled and frayed”, she explained, her eyes shining. “The Boltons lost a lot of men engaging Stannis during the siege of Winterfell. And despite Stannis having fallen in battle, many of these men never made it back. The food stores are dwindling while the winter storms continue to rage around us. It is just a matter of time before they turned on each other in earnest. But now that you are here we can hasten their demise. Lord Manderly will have his men primed and ready to strike when I give him the word. Then I will open the gates and let my army through to finish off the flayers and their ilk”.
Jon swallowed and glanced around with uncertainty showing on his face.

“Your army must be well hidden because we saw no sign of them”, he said.

A small, secretive smile crept on to Arya’s face.

“Aye”, she replied, “they blend in well with their surroundings. But I assure you that they are out there, a force to be reckoned with and ready to follow me”.

She gave the fire a poke before rising to her feet, slapping away the centuries-old dirt from her skirts.

“It would be best for all of you to remain down here until I come to fetch you”, she said.

Jon opened his mouth to protest but she cut him short.

“Tomorrow night”, she said. “You have my vow. In the meantime there is some straw, bedding and food hidden behind grandfather’s tomb. It’s not much but if you share it carefully it should keep you going until then”.

Jon scrambled to his feet. She reached out to steady him before standing on her tip toes to give him a swift kiss on his cheek.

“This will work, Jon…trust me”, she said before taking her leave. She grabbed a torch and disappeared silently into the gloom. After a few minutes they could hear the ironwood door creak open and shut again with a clang.

Satin spoke up first.

“Your sister, Jon, is not what I expected for the daughter of a high lord”, he said bluntly.

Jon let out a slow sigh.

“Aye”, he replied, “even when she was younger she defied all expectations. Arya always created her own path”.

Soren leaned forward with a puzzled look on his face.

“I don’t want to take a dig at your sister but can you truly trust her?” he asked. “You haven’t seen or heard from her in years and suddenly she shows up out of nowhere with a plan in place to take back her family home and claiming to have an army at her back that we haven’t seen hide nor hair of… where the fuck do you hide an army that can come to your aid at a moment’s notice?”

Jon shook his head and stared at the fire. He raised his hands, palms up, and tilted his head to one side.

“I have to give her the benefit of the doubt for now. If she fails to bring us out of here tomorrow night then we will have to take action on our own”, he replied.

Soren scowled and swore an oath under his breath. Val shot him a warning look.

“If you have no faith in this mission then you might as well leave now”, she snapped. “I expect Tormund would be grateful for the extra pair of hands manning the walls”.

Soren stared at her moodily.

“Can’t”, he mumbled.
Val crossed her arms and stared back boldly.

“Why not?” she asked.

Soren took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I made a promise and I’m sticking to it”, he replied, looking mulish.

For the next few hours they swapped stories and sang songs to pass away the time before bedding down for the night.

In the morning, a few of the men and women announced that they would return to the outside world in search of fresh game as the few meager offerings that Arya left for them barely fed them all and they were in no mood to live off the mice they could catch. Jon once again cautioned them to take extra care as poachers could expect little mercy from the Boltons.

As the hours ticked past, Soren paced the floor like a caged animal, his frustration growing with each glance at the ironwood door. He cracked his knuckles menacingly and punched the palm of one hand. Then a look of resolve passed over his face and he suddenly shifted direction, heading towards the great door. But Satin was quicker and moved in swiftly to block his path. Jon joined them, placing himself at Soren’s back.

“Don’t be stupid”, said Satin softly as he planted his hands firmly against Soren’s shoulders.

Soren’s breathing quickened to the point where he sounded like a bull moose preparing to charge. He reached up to pry Satin’s fingers loose but Satin tightened his grip before leaning forward.

“I know it probably galls you having to wait down here at the bidding of a little girl”, he said through clenched teeth. “But she’s the best means we have of getting in there effectively. Whereas you plan on charging about like a wounded animal, causing a ruckus and probably getting yourself killed in the bargain. You could also inadvertently betray us all so sit yourself down, you great oaf, and try palming yourself for a while…find something pleasurable to do to pass the time”.

The two men glared at each other for a few charged seconds until Soren backed down, his eyes now downcast and his shoulders slumped, and turned towards Jon.

“I’m sorry”, he mumbled. “I know I sometimes lack patience”.

Jon let out a breath that he didn’t realize he had been holding and slapped Soren on the back before nodding his thanks to Satin.

“These are trying times for all of us”, he said.

His words were overlapped by the noise of the hunters returning to the crypts with their bounty. Flushed and exuberant, they flung down their catch and produced their knives to begin the task of skinning their prey.

“It’s gone right eerie out there”, said one of the men as he peeled back the fur from a white hare. “It’s like the animals were trying to flee all at once…and I don’t think it was due simply to us tromping about. There’s something bigger coming that drove them from their shelters”.

“Methinks Arya’s troops are on the move”, murmured Jon. “T’would be best to fill our bellies quickly so that we’re ready for her summons”.

They were throwing the last of the bones on the fire when they heard the door groan.
“Jon”, Arya hissed, “come quickly…I need all of you now”.

One of the men hastily threw some water on the fire to douse it while everyone gathered up their weapons. Then they followed Arya out into the open air.

She scampered slightly ahead of them. Jon called out to her to wait for him but his words were lost to the cold and wind. He sped up to her and spun her around to get her attention.

“What the…?” he gasped as he stared in bewilderment.

The girl who stood before him had Arya’s hair, Arya’s eyes and wore Arya’s clothes but her face was rounder with pink apple cheeks and dimples that appeared when she smiled at him.

“Beyond the safety of the tombs I am not Arya”, she whispered.

“But how…?” began Jon.

Arya raised a finger to her lips and shook her head silently.

“One day I’ll explain but not now”, she replied. “All you need to know is that my name is Beth and I was a young servant girl entirely too trusting of strangers in this wicked, wicked world”.

Jon took note of her use of the past tense and filed it away.

As they crept past the armory, they could hear wolves calling to each other beyond the castle walls. Ghost grew increasingly agitated, nudging at Jon as if urging him to pick up the pace.

They paused as they reached a corner. Arya and Jon peered around to discover two sentries warming their hands over an open fire. Jon unsheathed Longclaw but Arya grabbed his hand and shook her head.

“I’ll take care of them”, she said before Jon could express his objections.

He watched her hips swaying as she sauntered over to the two men. They watched her approach with broad smiles on their faces, one of them licking his lips in anticipation of a little diversion from the mindnumbing boredom of night duty.

“Come to help keep us warm, love?” said one of the sentries. His companion shook his head with a low chuckle and turned back to the fire.

Jon couldn’t hear Arya’s reply as she moved closer to the man. He watched her raise her face to meet his…he watched her lips curl into a delicious pout…and then he watched as the man sank to his knees in shock and surprise, his blood spilling to the ground. His companion whirled around when he heard the man’s strangled cry but he wasn’t quick enough for Arya. He pitched forward, still shuddering and shaking, his hand still clenched around the pommel of his sword. Arya wiped her gutting knife on his breeches and slipped it beneath her skirts.

“Come”, she beckoned to Jon and the others.

They fanned out across the yard as Arya directed some of them to the towers and ramparts where the other sentries were posted.

“Take them out”, she said simply. Then she grabbed Jon.

“They’re using Father’s chambers”, she said. “You know the best way to get there but you’ll need some support”.

Jon nodded in understanding. Val, Satin and Soren instinctively drew closer, making it clear that he wasn’t going anywhere without them.

“Good luck”, dimpled Arya as she began to move towards the gate. The howling of the wolves beyond the walls was getting louder.

“Ar…Beth”, cried Jon, “don’t do anything foolhardy”.

She paused and turned towards him, the moonlight shining on her face. And for a brief moment he caught a glimpse of the eager little girl who would watch him and Robb spar in the yard, her bright, shining eyes hungry to join them.

“No fear, brother”, she replied coolly. “I’m a survivor”.

They could hear the wolves baying loudly, demanding entrance, at the gate as the portcullis was being raised. And then the largest pack of wolves he had ever witnessed came pouring into the yard. They snapped and snarled at the remaining guards who cowered and fled in their wake. And towering above them all was an enormous direwolf which barked out orders to the smaller wolves.

Ghost pushed his way through the pack to join his sister, Nymeria, whose presence he had sorely been missing.

Arya looked as triumphant as any conquering general as she ushered her lupine army into her childhood home.

Clever girl, thought Jon, as he and the others moved covertly towards the entrance that led to one of the secret passages. The wolves have truly returned to Winterfell.

As they entered the castle they could hear the grunts and shouts of the carnage that had already begun inside. Manderly’s men were already engaged in disposing of the Frey and Bolton men. Jon led his companions through the blood-soaked corridors, slashing and kicking at the enemy until they reached an innocuous looking door. Jon grabbed a torch from a nearby wall sconce and directed them through the doorway. Then he led them down a dark narrow passageway that twisted and turned until Val was fairly dizzy.

“Are we close?” she whispered.

Jon nodded and began to slow his pace until he stopped before a wooden panel in the wall. He groped around its edges until he found the sweet spot he was looking for and pressed firmly. The door slid open sideways in its frame, enough so that they could slip through the narrow opening and arrive in a small, airless space. Jon raised a hand to request silence as a soft spoken, calculating voice could be heard from the other side of the wall.

A pinprick of light shone through a tiny knothole. Jon placed an eye at the hole and watched silently for a few seconds. Then he held up four fingers before reaching above his head to place a hand on a small mechanism.

“Now”, he hissed as he unlatched the bolt and the secret door swung open.

The three guards looked startled as the intruders piled into the room. As Roose Bolton narrowed his pale eyes, two bright spots of red rose on his cheeks, the only colour in his otherwise deathly pallor. Then he blandly issued the order to kill them.

The guards charged at them with swords drawn but they were inadequate at such close quarters. Carefully honed knives soon drove them to their knees, begging for mercy or lying in a pool of their
own blood.

Soren held a knife to Roose’s throat while Jon leaned in menacingly.

“Where’s your son?” growled Jon.

Roose’s face showed nothing but cool disregard for the bastard son of Winterfell.

“Your brother was a fool for a king”, he said dispassionately. “Reckless, obstinate…unwilling to listen to his more experienced advisors apart from his bitch of a mother. Eventually even she was ignored when he grew tired of her incessant whining about wanting to trade Tywin’s whelp for her insipid daughters…oh….”

Roose glanced down at the knife that protruded from his belly. The blank expression on his face was replaced by the dawning realization that his life force was draining from his body. Jon rotated the knife and watched with grim pleasure as Roose’s cruel mouth twisted in pain before slowly collapsing to the floor. Then he placed a hand over Roose’s mouth and nose, pressing hard as Roose struggled slightly before lying perfectly still, his blood staining the rushes that were gathered beneath his body.

Satin looked uneasily from the Roose’s body to Jon’s thunderous face.

“Do you…do you think Ramsay is still here at Winterfell?” asked Satin quietly.

Jon rose to his feet and nodded. Then he closed his eyes briefly.

“What should we do with that one?” asked Val, nodding at the wounded guard who was struggling to take a breath.

Jon silently strode over to the door and wrenched it open. Three wolves crept into the room, growling softly as the wounded man whimpered and cried out in pain as he tried to move away from their slavering jaws.

“Let the wolves take care of him and all the rest of the Bolton scum”, replied Jon as one of the wolves took the guard’s arm between its teeth while the others began ripping into Roose’s soft belly.

They found Ramsay cowering in a corner within the kennels, surrounded by his beloved bitch hounds. The dogs barked and cried at their cousins, the wolves, begging them to let them go free. Ghost stood watch at the edge of the pack of wolves, his eyes trained on Ramsay’s pale, close set ones as they showed genuine fear, possibly for the first time in his life.

Jon waded through the pack of wolves and unlatched the pen. The dogs yelped and fell over each other in their haste to escape while the wolves snapped at the dogs’ haunches as they pushed past to freedom. After the last of the dogs had left, Ramsay remained crouched on the straw and feces laden floor.

“Get on your feet, bastard”, said Jon.

Ramsay lifted his head and stared at Jon, a malevolent smile slowly forming on his wormlike lips.

“Bastard no more…at least my father had enough esteem for me to have the king bestow on me legitimacy…unlike your precious father”, he said calmly.

Jon winced. That particular barb hit its mark. His mouth tightened in anger.
Soren gave Ramsay a swift kick in the ribs.

“He told you to get up, ye whey-faced git”, Soren growled.

Ramsay swore as he clutched at his injured side.

Soren squatted next to him and poked Ramsay in the chest with his knife.

“I know what you did to Jeyne”, said Soren softly.

Ramsay’s face held a mixture of fear and defiance as he licked his lips.

“I…I needed them all to believe she was the Stark girl so my father could secure the north”, he said hoarsely. “And I needed to get her with child”.

Soren dragged the point of the knife down Ramsay’s chest until it reached his abdomen. He paused and stared back into Ramsay’s eyes before barking out a short, bitter laugh.

“All that cruelty just to please your da’?” Soren scoffed.

He leaned forward until his nose almost touched Ramsay’s.

“You enjoyed hurting her…humiliating her. And once she served her purpose you would have tossed her aside like a used snot rag or worse”, he said, fairly spitting venom with every word.

Soren glanced up at Jon and a look passed between them. Jon nodded…he’s yours, Soren, the look said.

“Jon?” came a voice from outside the pen. It was Arya, returned to her familiar face.

Jon linked arms with her as they passed through the kennel entrance, watching the wolves as they circulated around the yard.

“We’ve secured the castle”, reported Arya. “Winterfell belongs to us once again”.

“To you”, Jon gently corrected her. “Winterfell has never, and will never, belong to me. It should always belong to the Starks”.

Arya laid her head on his shoulder.

“Then I make you an honorary Stark, Jon…if only for tonight’, she replied.

Their moment of peace was broken by agonizing cry that pierced the night. And then there was silence.

Jon and Arya turned towards the entrance to the kennels where they found Val standing in the doorway.

“It’s over”, said Val, folding her arms and shivering slightly. “All in all Ramsay’s cock was rather on the small side…it barely filled his big, ugly mouth. I’m sure if Tormund had been there he would’ve whipped out his own member and waggled it about for the sake of comparison but Soren wasn’t in the mood for any more games”.

Val turned back into the kennels after promising Ramsay’s head to Arya, despite Jon’s look of consternation. Arya shrugged her shoulders.
“I want it mounted on a pike as a warning”, she said. “The wolves are back and woes betide anyone who tries to oust us again”.
Chapter 8

Val placed a hand on the mattress and pressed down. Her eyes widened as she watched the ticking puffed up when she withdrew her hand. She turned to Jon as he was shrugging off his shirt.

“Is it filled with moss?” she asked. “It’s so soft and springy”.

Jon shook his head.

“Feathers”, he replied. “Thousands of downy feathers from geese, ducks, chickens…all manner of fowl, both wild and domestic, I expect”.

Val turned and sat on the bed.

“All those birds dying just so the lords and ladies of this place could sleep on soft beds”, she said with a frown. “I hope none of the meat went to waste”.

Jon reached down and took her hand.

“In a place this size I’m sure that all those birds were consumed”, he murmured as he kissed the back of her hand. “In its heyday there were so many people living in Winterfell that sometimes the kitchens were open all hours. The place fairly vibrated with life, even in the dead of winter”.

“And now?” she asked.

She could see his face sag and melancholy clouded his eyes.

“Now it’s a pale shadow of its former self despite the fresh wood and paint”, he replied. “I keep rounding corners expecting to see familiar faces but all I see are ghosts of a life long since gone”.

A look of hesitation passed over her face before she gently tickled the inside of his wrist.

“It’s high time we tried out this mattress together”, she said with a mischievous look in her eyes.

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Then he sat down next to her, allowing her to push him backwards on to the bed before she rolled off it. She deftly untied the laces on his breeches and yanked them off with a flourish before tossing them to the floor. When she removed his smallclothes his erection sprang to attention.

Jon moaned as her mouth closed over his stiff cock, her tongue swirling around its swollen tip. She stroked his shaft with one hand while the fingers of the other danced over his groin, causing him to buck and moan loudly. When she believed she had teased him long enough, she shimmied out of her shirt and leggings and crawled back on to the bed.

She straddled his chest first while resting on her knees, allowing him to pull her towards him before burying his face in her mound. She closed her eyes and took a sudden, sharp breath as his tongue darted between her folds and hit its mark. His hands roamed her backside as his tongue burrowed deeper into her, eliciting soft whimpers from her lips as he drove her closer to her peak.

She held her breath as the familiar warm, tingling sensation spread through her toes and she collapsed on to his chest as waves of pleasure washed over her. Then, wordlessly, she rose up slightly and reached back to guide his still erect cock into her. As she slid up and down rhythmically, she watched his eyes squeeze shut as his breathing became more hurried and erratic until he finally
stiffened, spilling inside her with a shudder and a low groan.

She leaned forward and brushed the hair from his face, whispering endearments as he panted quietly, his eyes still closed.

She leaned forward to kiss his slightly parted lips. His breathing had slowed, becoming shallow and regular as she realized that he had drifted off to sleep, thoroughly spent.

She fussed and rearranged the coarse wool blankets and furs over him before crawling beneath the coverings, pressing up against him for warmth. He stirred briefly before turning over on to his side, his arms outstretched like a child. She lifted his hair and kissed the back of his damp neck.

“I think I might just love you, Jon Snow”, she whispered before lowering her chin and tucking her brow against his back.

“Love you, too”, he slurred, his voice heavy with sleep.

Then she smiled to herself as she draped an arm around him before joining him in slumber.

She awoke briefly during the middle of the night. She lay still, watching the interplay of the bright light of the dying fire with the dark gloom that hovered around the corners of the room.

As long as there is still a flicker of light, she thought, then we can never truly be lost to the darkness.

When she awoke again in the morning, Jon was still sleeping soundly, his snores reverberating throughout the room. Val decided that further sleep was impossible so she clambered out of bed and dressed quickly.

She found Arya in the great hall, deep in conversation with a portly man with a massive belly and multiple chins. She recognized him from the aftermath of the battle for control of Winterfell.

“The last time we met, milord, you were sat upon a shrieking woman, threatening to crush her if she did not yield”, said Val.

Arya guffawed while Wyman Manderly smiled genially.

“Lady Barbrey Dustin is not a woman easily persuaded in the face of defeat”, he replied. “But I’ll admit to having a certain amount of admiration for her despite her being such a bitter, dried up old hag”.

Arya made introductions and then gestured to Val to sit.

“Thank you, milady”, murmured Val as she pulled out a chair.

“Please call me Arya”, Arya replied. “In light of your relationship with my brother, would it be fair to refer to you as my good-sister?”

Val felt her ears go pink as she sat down.

“We belong to each other…aye”, she replied evenly. “There are no ceremonies where I come from when a man and a woman declare a bond for each other”.

Arya raised a hand.

“I didn’t mean to cast aspersions on your customs”, she said, leaning forward. “I simply want everyone to understand that you are now family and should be accorded all due respect. Jon is very
special to me...to all of us, despite his bastard status”.

Val sat back and shook her head slightly. The rules of propriety that governed these powerful and wealthy southern clans never failed to amuse and astound her. That Jon should be regarded as a lesser sibling simply because his father strayed outside the bounds of matrimony gave her pause. The clans further north didn’t bother themselves with such petty details...blood was blood and everybody was required to play an equal part in ensuring the clan’s survival.

Arya’s face brightened as she looked up and over Val’s shoulder. Val twisted around to discover Jon standing in the doorway, still wiping the sleep from his eyes. Then he crossed the floor to shake hands with Lord Manderly and deliver a perfunctory kiss on his sister’s cheek before seating himself next to Val.

“You should have given me a shake”, he said softly as he leaned over to bestow a kiss on her lips. She laid a hand on his cheek and smiled.

“You were sawing wood so deeply that I didn’t have the heart to wake you”, she replied.

Jon turned his attention to Arya.

“Have the dungeons been emptied yet?” he asked, a tinge of anxiety crossing his face.

Arya glanced at Lord Manderly and mouthed a name. Manderly looked chagrined and shook his head.

“Sorry, lad...the singer, Abel, is dead”, he replied. “Food was getting scarce and we had been informed that you were dead. The Boltons had no further use for him so they wasted no time executing him and tossing his body over the wall as a feast for the scavengers”.

Jon looked crestfallen at the news while Val bowed her head in sorrow, grieving the loss of her good-brother. She mulled over again the fate of Dalla and Mance’s young son, taken south for his own protection at Jon’s instigation. If we survive the coming darkness then I will urge Jon to take me south to find the last of my family, she vowed to herself.

“But Lord Manderly does have some good news, Jon”, said Arya.

Manderly nodded and leaned forward, his chair groaning under his girth.

“Aye...I believe I know where your brother Rickon has been hiding”, he said softly.

Jon shifted his gaze from Manderly’s face to his sister’s, seeking confirmation.

“Where?” asked Jon warily.

“Skagos”, replied Manderly, “taken there by the wildling woman, Osha”.

Jon straightened up and blinked rapidly while Val let out a small cry of dismay.

“Jon”, she said sharply, “the Skaggs are a strange and inhospitable people. It has been said that when the winter winds blow fierce that they turn to eating their own in order to survive. Why would she have taken him there?”

Jon looked at her uneasily.

“Aye”, he replied, “they do have a fearsome reputation. Some say they lure passing ships to their
doom with false lights, and then murder the survivors before plundering the ships and setting them ablaze. Nevertheless, they owe their allegiance to House Stark and they hold no affection for the Boltons. Osha may have reasoned that such a remote, northern outpost might the last possible place that anybody would expect to look for him”.

Jon wrung his hands together as he mulled over this new bit of information. It wasn’t much to go on but it was enough to stir him into action. He slapped his knees and rose to his feet.

“I’ll go to Skagos and if he’s there then I will bring him home”, he announced.

“Jon”, protested Arya, “We never meant to suggest that you should go”.

Jon’s eyes met hers.

“Would you rather send a stranger?” he asked hotly. “Because it’s highly unlikely that Rickon would return home accompanied by somebody he doesn’t know. No…it should be family”.

Arya opened her mouth to speak but Jon quickly shot her down.

“And no…it can’t be you”, he snapped. “Not now that we finally have a Stark back in Winterfell”.

She folded her arms and glared at him.

“I could come with you once Sansa arrives from the Vale”, she retorted.

Jon shook his head. Val watched with some amusement as brother and sister stared at each other, each of them just as willful as the other.

Jon was the first to crack.

“Look…it could take Sansa weeks to arrive. Her journey is bound to be slow due to the winter snows and she will be accompanied by an army of the Vale, many of whom will be on foot”, he reasoned.

Arya opened her mouth to offer a counter argument but Jon raised his hand.

“I need to go now”, he explained. “The crossing will be treacherous enough with the rough currents. With the advent of winter there’s the risk of pack ice and I don’t want to end up crushed like a nut upon a shoal”.

Lord Manderly struggled to his feet and placed a fatherly hand on Jon’s shoulder.

“Let me arrange passage on a ship to transport you there, lad”, said Manderly.

The two men shook hands vigorously while Arya rolled her eyes in defeat. Then Jon glanced at Val who had been remained silent during the discussion.

“If you do not wish to come then I’m sure you are welcome to stay here at Winterfell…I’m sure Arya would welcome your company”, he said as Arya tilted her head to one side and smiled in confirmation. “Or you could accompany Soren and the others back to Oakenshield where you know Tormund will welcome you back like a daughter”.

Val sighed before rising out of her chair.

“I knew that sleeping on that feather bed would be short lived”, she said with a wry smile playing on her lips. “I’ll go with you, Jon Snow…you’ll need me to interpret for you at the very least. Your
grasp of the Old Tongue is shaky at best and I don’t want you to end up in somebody’s stew pot just because you cussed him out by mistake”.

When Jon broke the news to Satin about the journey, his former steward immediately began rattling off a list of provisions they would need until Jon stopped him with a shake of his head.

“No”, said Jon, “I need you to stay here”.

Satin looked hurt and dumfounded.

“Why?” he asked.

Jon hesitated briefly before replying.

“Provisioning and staffing a place as big as Winterfell is going to be a monumental undertaking”, he said. “My sister is going to need a lot of help restoring this place and I believe that you’re the right person to help her until my other sister arrives”.

Satin looked at Jon in astonishment.

“Your words are very kind, Jon, but unfounded”, said Satin finally. “I really don’t see how I can be of any help”.

Jon smiled and shook his head.

“Don’t be so self-deprecating”, he said. “Your time with the stewards, your skill with sword and bow, your patience and forbearance…these are qualities she will need in a trusted advisor. Many of the northerners will rally to her side simply because she is Ned Stark’s daughter…but others may not be so forthcoming. It will be difficult and frustrating for her at times and she could use somebody like you to smooth away the rough patches until our sister, Sansa, arrives. Diplomacy and tact are in Sansa’s wheelhouse so she will be instrumental in getting those more reluctant northern lords on board”.

Satin lowered his head briefly before nodding. He took a deep breath before speaking.

“As long as she is in total agreement…” he began.

“She won’t say no”, interrupted Jon. “I’ll make sure of it”.

Satin shook his head with a rueful smile.

“I don’t know, Jon”, he said with a chuckle. “You and your sister share a certain stubborn streak. But I expect if I can handle your mulish tendencies then I can handle hers”.

Jon looked mildly outraged at first then broke into a smile and clapped Satin on the back.

“I knew you were up to the challenge”, he said. “I can’t say you’ll have no regrets but I promise you that you won’t be bored”.

Jon took the news to Arya who received it with a mixture of amusement and annoyance.

“As long as he stays out of my way then we should get along just fine”, she said after much cajoling on Jon’s part.

They spent the balance of the afternoon in Arya’s rooms, sharing a skin of wine and reminiscing about their shared childhood. They grew misty eyed as they recalled days of mock sword fighting in
the yard and playing chasing games, their high childish voices echoing through the grey stone corridors.

Arya impatiently wiped away the tears with the back of her hand while Jon poured out more wine.

“Promise me you’ll find him and bring him back”, she said quietly. “In my dreams we are still together…running as wolves…snapping and biting…our fur keeping us warm during the frigid winter nights…the taste of blood still fresh on our lips”.

She turned towards him, her eyes full of sorrow.

“Sometimes I think I hear Bran’s voice calling to me in the Godswood”, she continued. “But then I shake myself out of my reverie and let the cold reality return”.

“He’ll come back, Arya”, said Jon. “I can feel it deep down in my bones that he’s alive out there...somewhere beyond our reach but that one day he will return when the time is right”.

Arya reached out and touched his shoulder.

“Thank you, Jon”, she said. “Oddly enough…that gives me a small measure of comfort”.

When dawn broke two mornings later, the sun spilled its rosy light over the glittering snow while Jon closed his eyes and breathed in deep the smell of his childhood home. He smiled at the memories the scent of the pines mingling with the wood smoke evoked while Ghost brushed up against him. He reached down to still his direwolf while Arya barked out some final orders to the men coming on watch.

Lord Manderly was already ensconced in his sleigh, covered in furs, and surrounded by a retinue of his men. Soren and the other wildlings sat astride their dancing horses, glancing at the front gate with narrowed eyes and furrowed brows. This was not their home and it was clear from the impatience showing on their pinched faces that they were ready to be gone.

“What have you enough supplies for the journey, Jon?” asked Satin anxiously.

Jon’s eyes opened and he nodded at Satin. Then he reached out and grasped Satin’s shoulders before pulling him in for a hug.

“Thank you for everything, brother”, he whispered as he clapped Satin on the back.

Arya reached into the pocket of her cloak and produced a small object. Then she crossed over to Soren and reached up to pass it to him.

“I believe this should go to Jeyne with my regards”, she said as she pressed a ring into his hand. “I found it in her family quarters, hidden behind some loose mortar. Perhaps it belonged to her mother or some relation long passed away”.

Soren held up the ring to admire it before depositing it into the pouch at his waist. He nodded gravely.

“If her memories of this place are not totally soured then perhaps she might treasure this bit of jewelry. If not, then I suppose we could trade it away for food and weapons”, he said. Then, after making his farewells to Jon and Satin, he motioned to the others to join as they headed out the gate to travel northwards home.

Once Soren was safely out the gate, Jon leaned over to whisper in Arya’s ear.
“Was any of that story true?” he asked.

Arya stared straight ahead for few seconds, her face remaining impassive; he could see the corners of her mouth tug upwards.

“You always could tell when I was lying”, she replied.

“So where did the ring come from, then?” he asked.

She glanced about furtively before answering.

“From a woman who no longer had any use for it”, she replied cryptically. “And now I want Jeyne to have it as a token…something to remind her of happier times. I want her to remember who she was before the horror of having to pretend to be me was forced upon her”.

He leaned forward, so close that their foreheads almost touched.

“I’m happy that the Arya I grew up with still lingers inside of you”, he said, “and that you’re still capable of small kindnesses”.

Arya leaned back slightly and drew aside her cloak to reveal a small sword fastened to the belt wrapped around her waist.

“I had my own token as a constant reminder of who I was while others tried to strip my identity away”, she said fiercely. “How could I deny that to an innocent like Jeyne who had everything taken away from her?”

Jon reached down and ran his fingers lightly across the slender blade. The sword that he had gifted to her when she was a child was battered and slightly bent but still whole and quite lethal. Like its owner it, too, was a survivor.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Val sauntering across the yard bearing a pack on her shoulder.

“Have you made your goodbyes then, Jon Snow?” she called out cheerfully. “Legend has it they have unicorns on Skagos and I rather fancy myself astride a horse that wields its own weapon”.

The snows began to recede as they plodded further south along the Kingsroad to White Harbour. At times, the air was filled with the cacophony of hundreds of birds flying in from every direction, swooping in from the sky, the vanguard of a mass exodus as the dark night encroached. Some fanned out across the land thick with frosted stubble while others congregated in the barren trees, flapping and fidgeting, edgy with the exertion of migration.

Val plucked absently at the few stubborn leaves that clung to the branches of the trees as she brushed past them, slipping some of them into her pack.

“Starting a collection, I see”, teased Jon as he rode up beside her.

She smiled as she held up the dark purple foliage.

“I’ve never seen leaves in so many colours before”, she said in wonder as she traced a finger over the veins that ran through the leaf.

“The leaves stored in your pack won’t last long”, warned Jon. “The cold has made them dry and brittle so they’re bound to be in pieces by nightfall”.

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She shrugged her shoulders.

“No matter”, she said. “They’re like sunshine and good company…the small pleasures that ease the burden of daily life. You have to enjoy them while you can because they’ll be gone soon enough”.

The sky, ice blue for most of the day, turned indigo in the late afternoon…signaling that it was time to seek shelter for the night. A wayside inn was found just as the sky blackened and a chilly haze settled over the surrounding countryside. They consumed the meager supper set out before them and then sat around the roaring fire to warm themselves before retiring to their rooms.

Lord Manderly rubbed his portly legs vigorously.

“The Seven take these blasted chilblains”, he complained bitterly. Then he poured himself another cup of wine.

“How much further, my lord?” asked Jon as he waved away the offer of more wine.

“Oh…I estimate another two days’ ride”, replied Manderly, smacking his lips in satisfaction.

Val accepted more drink and sat back to savour the fermented fruit nectar while Jon leaned forward, keeping his voice low.

“Will it be difficult finding a sea captain to take us to Skagos?” asked Jon. “The waters surrounding the island are dangerous enough without the added risk of early winter storms threatening to send us all to a watery grave”.

Lord Manderly digested Jon’s words for a minute before replying.

“Aye…it won’t be easy but there are always some who are foolhardy enough for the right amount of coin”, he replied. “But I believe I know just the man to take the bait”.

The man who met them in a tavern located next to the docks in White Harbour was, in Val’s initial appraisal, was both colourful and disarming. He stood up and extended his hand to Lord Manderly as they approached his table.

“Lord Manderly”, said Salladhor Saan smoothly with a broad smile, the peacock feathers in his green cloth cap bobbing as he shook Manderly’s hand vigorously. “I take these are my passengers?”

“Aye”, replied Manderly as he made introductions. Then Saan gestured for them to join him at his table.

Saan nodded gravely as Manderly reiterated the conditions of the arrangements that had been agreed upon while Jon and Val listened quietly. Then Saan sat back and laced his fingers over the folds of his silver robe.

“Winter has come, milord”, said Saan smoothly with a broad smile, the peacock feathers in his green cloth cap bobbing as he shook Manderly’s hand vigorously. “I take these are my passengers?”

“Aye”, replied Manderly as he made introductions. Then Saan gestured for them to join him at his table.

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“Winter has come, milord”, said Saan, “and she is a cold-hearted bitch. Word from the captains of the ships that have limped into port over the past few days is that powerful winter winds have been brewing up and down the coast. They bring with them sleet as sharp as crystal shards and hail the size of small boulders. And the snow…the snow has been relentless, blotting out the sky, with the air so cold it hurts to take a breath”.

A look of understanding dawned on Manderly’s face. He rose slowly to his feet and leaned over, allowing the weight of his girth to rest on the table top and causing the table to tilt slightly towards him.

“I’m not increasing my fee, Saan”, said Manderly, speaking in a measured if menacing tone. “If you
don’t agree to the original arrangement then I will find somebody else who needs the coin more than you”.

Saan gave him a sly look and shook his head.

“No, no, no”, he protested, waving his hands in a gesture of surrender. “You misunderstand me, milord…I merely wanted to point out the dangers inherent in such an adventure…just in case anything terrible should befall young Snow and his lovely lady companion”.

He glanced at Jon and Val with a broad smile of contrition laced with a touch of larceny. Clearly Salladhor Saan was not a man to be fully trusted but time was of the essence and Jon was too impatient to wait much longer in seeking out his youngest brother.

Manderly slapped the table loudly before straightening up.

“Then it’s settled”, said Manderly. “We meet again tomorrow at dawn. You will receive half of your payment once your passengers are aboard and the rest when you return them safely to my custody”.

Saan paled slightly but he nodded.

“You drive a hard bargain, milord”, said Saan.

“Aye”, replied Manderly as he nodded to his guards, “but I also pay exceedingly well…and I demand the best in return. So, if you wish me to favour you in future then you won’t let me down”.

As they left the tavern, Lord Manderly wrapped an arm around Jon’s shoulder.

“Don’t be deterred by the man’s flashy attire and his shady reputation”, whispered Manderly after a brief backwards glance at the old pirate. “He knows every inch of the coastline around Skagos and he is no fool. He’ll not willingly put you in harm’s way for the amount of money I’ve promised him in return”.

Jon sighed inwardly and hoped that Lord Manderly was right in his assessment of Saan. He looked at Val apologetically, instantly regretting that he ever agreed to let her come with him.

“Don’t fret, Jon Snow”, she said as she linked arms with him. “Keep your eyes on the prize. With any luck you’ll soon be reunited with your sweet wee brother”.

Aye, thought Jon. Rickon was just a wee young thing when last he saw of him. He was never an easy child but a life spent among the savages of Skagos was not the life he was meant to lead as a young lordling of Winterfell.

Jon gazed morosely at the bustling harbour. For the first time since Lord Manderly broke the news about Rickon being alive, he felt his optimism begin to waiver. But he pulled himself back from the brink of despair and squared his shoulders.

“Aye”, he replied with a squeeze of her arm, “we’re going to bring him home”.

Chapter 9

Val let out a gasp before turning her head to the side and spewing bile into the wooden bucket that had been placed strategically on the floor next to the cot.

“Come in”, she called out weakly in response to the light rap on the door to the cabin.

Jon’s face fell when he could see the spittle drying on the corner of her mouth and the bucket half filled with last night’s supper. He sat down on the edge of the cot and laid the back of his hand on her forehead, his face a mask of concern.

“There’s no fever”, she muttered as she batted away his hand before dislodging the contents of her belly into the bucket once more. He nodded and rose up to grab a pitcher that had been placed just beyond her reach and tipped it over to pour her some water but nothing came forth. He uttered a few oaths while searching around the cabin for something hard and narrow that he could use to break up the band of ice that had formed on the surface of the water in the pitcher.

Val shivered and shimmied further down beneath her furs. Then she reached up to accept the cup that he offered her, the icy water so cold that her back teeth ached as she swallowed. After another sip she tried to return the cup but he pushed it back towards her.

“More”, he insisted. “You can’t risk getting dehydrated”.

Val looked at him in exasperation before taking a few more sips of the cold water and then lay back against the damp sheets.

“T’would be nicer to drink mulled wine”, she said, her teeth chattering slightly as he tucked the furs around her shoulders.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

“Later…I promise”, he replied. “But for now water is best”.

Val stared balefully at the low ceiling and watched the lanterns sway with every fresh swell of waves beneath the bowels of the ship.

“I should have stayed at Winterfell with your sister”, she moaned. “At least the ground there doesn’t roll and pitch and threaten to toss me into the rough seas”.

Jon gave her a sympathetic smile and patted her hand.

“Salladhor reckons you’ll be feeling better in a day or two…once you get your sea legs”, he said.

She glanced over at Ghost who was curled up tightly in a corner, looking almost as miserable as she felt. His red eyes were watery and his fur looked damp and patchy.

“Ghost and I were not meant for sailing the high seas”, she said with a sigh. “I suspect we’re not even suitable to travel across a pond in a small rowboat. We’re better off on dry land, the pair of us…it’s just not in the cards for us to risk becoming some kraken’s next meal”.

Jon chuckled softly and promised to return with some hard tack.

“If you can keep that down then we try the wine next”, he said.
The next morning found Val leaning heavily against the railing of the ship, staring off into the horizon and drinking in the anemic rays of the sun. Jon stood by her side, his arm firmly around her waist while Ghost padded about the deck carefully, glaring from time to time at the seagulls that hovered overhead in anticipation of a quick meal.

“A little better?” asked Jon.

Val closed her eyes and nodded. The roiling in her belly had subsided and her legs tremulously held her upright for the most part. She opened her eyes again and gazed at the sheets of ice that drifted past with the current.

“It’s a shame we would couldn’t wait and just walk across the ice to Skagos”, she muttered.

“That would be far more dangerous, milady”, came a voice from behind her. Then Salladhor Saan appeared at her left shoulder and leaned against the railing companionably.

“Like a beautiful woman, ice is difficult to gauge what is going on beneath its glittering surface”, he continued smoothly. “On the surface it may appear smooth and placid but underneath lurks volatility and possible danger”.

Val rolled her eyes and stared gloomily at the grey water that swirled and slapped the sides of the ship.

“How much longer until we reach Skagos, then?” she asked, a plaintive note in her voice.

Saan gazed off into the distance and took a couple of breaths of the tangy salt air.

“Another five days, I reckon”, he replied. “Assuming we’re not beset by any early winter storms”.

After another day had passed, the churning and dizziness had quelled and Val could now endure a couple of hours a day on deck, hanging gamely on to whatever came to hand. The cold, bitter winds mixed with salty spray were becoming preferable to the stale air below which was still redolent of sick, piss and greasy mutton mixed with cabbage.

Jon was the first to point out the land mass that loomed in the distance. Sleet pelted her face as Val peered beneath the shelter of her hand to view the forbidding island of Skagos.

“Salladhor plans on dropping anchor shortly and then we’ll wait until nightfall to go ashore”, explained Jon.

Val could barely make out the craggy, unwelcoming shoreline before shifting her gaze nervously to the ice floes that bobbed and bumped up against the beam ends.

“There’ll be no all night in tonight, lads”, shouted Saan to his crew. “We’re all on watch as the Skaggs will do their best to lure us ashore to no good end. So be prepared to cut and run as soon as our passengers have disembarked”.

Clouds drifted past the moon as Jon, Val and Ghost set out with one of Saan’s seamen operating the oars. The sea was relatively calm apart from the catspaws that periodically ruffled the waters and set the small rowboat rocking furiously from side to side.

The seaman uttered some colourful curses as he waged war with the ice that encroached on the small craft. Jon and Val exchanged anxious glances as it was becoming increasingly apparent that the open pitch black water was quickly being overtaken by the gleaming white ice.
The boat hit hard with a jolt and an audible crunch. Jon and Val each gasped and held on to the sides of the boat as the seaman scrambled out and tugged on it until it was halfway on to the hard ice and tilted slightly on its side. Ghost leapt out of the boat first and and skidded on the ice before stopping just inches from the water’s edge.

“This is as far as I can take you”, said the seaman as he reached out to take Val’s hand.

Jon stared at the rugged coastline which was still distant and remote.

“You can’t just drop us off here”, he hissed angrily.

The seaman gestured helplessly at the sea of ice that was tightly packed along the shoreline.

“End of the line”, the man grunted as he proffered his hand to Jon.

Jon stared at the hand before grabbing it with a shake of his head.

The trio watched the man push off in his tiny boat and fade into the darkness, till all that was left of him was the sound of the oars dipping rhythmically into the water.

Jon and Val linked arms and turned towards the land. As they crept along the shifting sea ice, Ghost skittered ahead, forging a path for them to follow. All around them was silence apart from the lapping of the waves at the edge of the ice and the wind whistling past their ears.

Val gripped Jon’s arm tighter as the ice beneath them began to groan.

“Drowning must be an awful way to die”, she whispered.

“The cold makes you numb…making you lose all sensation before the water takes you”, he whispered back.

She leaned against his shoulder.

“That’s some small comfort”, she replied drily.

They ducked their heads as the winds began to rise. Then a gentle snow began to fall with flakes that twirled and danced in the breeze. But within minutes the winds began to howl and the snow intensified, driving at them as if trying to repel them from reaching land.

Abandon all hope all ye who dare to venture closer, the storm seemed to wail.

After slipping and falling several times, they finally crawled up on the craggy shore and sat in the shelter of a shallow cave to gain their bearings.

“We can rest here until dawn…then we will set out to find him”, said Jon as he opened his pack to produce a flint.

“How long do we have before we’re stranded here?” asked Val as she rose to begin gathering bits of dried moss and twigs to start the fire.

“Five days…that’s all”, replied Jon. “Salladhor promised that he will return to pick us up at the same spot. If we’re not here then we’ll have to find our own way back to the mainland”.

They scavenged enough driftwood from the beach to build a roaring fire. After feasting on some tough, dried meat and hard tack, they bedded down on piles of fragrant spruce branches while Ghost disappeared in search of fresh game.
That night, Jon dreamt of Robb. The clacking of their wooden swords filled the air as Robb used his superior height and strength to aggressively attack while Jon furiously parried to stave off a hit…until Jon finally saw his opening and struck Robb. The master of arms called a halt to the skirmish in order to examine the bruise that was welling on Robb’s arm and then ordered that some ice wrapped in a cloth be brought to bring down the swelling. Jon looked on, anxiety building in the pit of his stomach, wondering what Lady Catelyn would have to say this time about the bastard striking the heir to Winterfell….until Robb, sensing his brother’s discomfort, clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ll deal with Mother, Jon”, he said cheerfully. “Don’t you worry about that”.

Then he took up his practice sword and waved it in Jon’s face.

“C’mon, brother”, he said, with a broad grin, “give us another chance. Come at me with all you’ve got”.

Jon woke up with Robb’s words still echoing in his head.

The fire was reduced to sodden ash with barely a curl of grey smoke rising from its remains. Val was curled up tightly against him with her head tucked under his chin while Ghost lay snoring at his feet. They both began to stir as they sensed Jon’s movements.

Val rubbed her stiffened limbs and rotated her arms to restore her circulation.

“So…where do we begin our search?” she asked.

Jon glanced at Ghost.

“We move inland, trying to avoid contact with the locals as much as possible…they’re reputedly hostile to strangers. But if we can’t avoid a confrontation then I’m hoping the Stark name has some currency here. Once Ghost picks up Shaggydog’s presence we’ll follow his lead, hopefully straight to Rickon”, he replied.

Val felt encouraged by Jon’s cautious optimism and silently hoped that this adventure would not end in tears.

They trudged through the deepening snow across a desolate landscape. The trees were scattered and few, hanging on tenaciously to the rocky soil beneath. A low-hanging grey mist made navigating the unknown terrain difficult but provided some cover from curious eyes.

Ghost bounded ahead, pausing briefly at times to sniff at the air and stare off into the distance. Val and Jon took these moments as opportunities to take in their surroundings. As the day wore on the mist began to burn off, revealing smoke rising above the treeline. Jon jerked his head silently in the direction of the smoke and Val nodded. They were turning to take another route when they heard a crashing noise coming from nearby.

The deer was a splendid young buck, its head sporting the fuzzy thumbs that were the remnants of the antlers that had been shed for winter. It froze when it spotted Ghost. The direwolf dipped his head and flattened his ears as he approached his prey. They deer began to back away as Ghost drew closer and then turned to run away, exposing its flank. But Ghost was too quick and sank his jaws into the deer’s rump, clamping down on it tightly while the deer struggled desperately to escape.

Val drew an arrow from the quiver slung across her back and drew back on her bow. The arrow found its mark and within seconds blood gushed from the buck’s throat before it stumbled and sank into the snow with a piteous cry. Ghost’s tail wagged furiously as he tugged at the deer’s haunch, wrenching it from the carcass and dragging the limb across the snow a few inches to begin his feast.
“I’m sure he won’t mind sharing”, murmured Val as she took a few steps with Jon in her wake.

They halted when they heard the shouts coming from beyond the trees. They glanced around in a panic, looking for somewhere to take shelter but they were too late. Val planted a hand on Jon’s chest and raised a finger to her lips. She would do the talking.

The three men’s faces were hard and weatherbeaten. They surrounded Jon and Val, gesticulating wildly and making a display of their weaponry. The oldest of the three spoke a few sharp words in the Old Tongue as he gestured towards the dead deer. Ghost stopped chewing on the leg and watched the group with narrowed eyes while Jon nervously fingered the knife at his hip.

Val tried to keep her voice and face calm and neutral as she listened to the man’s tirade.

“They’re upset about the loss of the deer”, she muttered as she translated the man’s words. “They had been tracking it for several hours. Sacrifices have been made and this was regarded as a gift from the gods as game is notoriously scarce in these parts, especially now that winter has come”.

Jon could see the underlying look of desperation in their eyes and he nodded knowingly.

“Ghost”, he called out sharply.

The direwolf raised his head and stood up.

“Tell them the rest of the carcass is theirs as long as Ghost is can finish the leg that he has already begun to gnaw on”, he said, raising his hands in a gesture of conciliation. “Tell them…we know how harsh winter can be in the north and we have no desire to take much needed food from their mouths”.

The men’s faces softened as Val conveyed the words and they made of show of putting their weapons away. Then she introduced herself to the Skagosi huntsmen.

“Jon Snow”, said Jon, thrusting out his hand. He searched the men’s faces for signs of recognition but he could detect none. He was relieved. It was better to regard him as just another bastard son of some faithless, nameless northern mainland lord than the son of their liege lord.

After the two younger Skagosi fastened the deer with strips of leather on to a long, sturdy pole before raising it to their shoulders, the oldest man spoke a few more words to Val.

“They’re invited us to enjoy the spoils of the hunt”, she reported cautiously. “Should we take a chance and join them? Some fresh cooked meat would not go amiss right now…as long as we’re not on the menu”.

Jon smiled and nodded. The older man smiled back, his mouth filled with gaps where many of his teeth used to reside.

The deer was hung from the branch of a tree where the skin was removed and preserved so it could be tanned and sewn into clothing later. Then the flesh was carved away from the carcass and shoved onto sharpened sticks to be cooked over the open fire. Later, she knew that the remaining meat would be carefully wrapped and packed in ice and snow for the journey home to be shared with the rest of the clan. The bones would eventually be cleaned and fashioned into rudimentary tools…no part of the animal would be wasted in this part of the world.

Val and Jon relished the taste of the freshly roasted venison, especially after subsisting on dried, salted meat for so long. One of the Skagosi returned with a handful of berries that he had picked and passed them around the campfire for everyone to share.
The conversation eventually dwindled until the oldest man directed a question to Val which was one that she wasn’t prepared to answer without Jon’s input.

“He wants to know why we’ve come here…especially now that winter has arrived”, she said.

Jon lowered his eyes and rapidly processed how he would respond before deciding that half-truths would be better than outright lies.

“Tell him…tell him that I’ve come seeking my little brother, a boy between six and seven years of age, who lives somewhere on Skagos with his mother”, he began. “Our father is dying and wants to see him one more time before he passes away”.

Val conveyed this information to the men before turning back to Jon.

“They are willing to help if you give them more information”, she said.

Jon hesitated, watching the men’s faces for clues that their motives may be less than pure but they seemed merely blandly interested in his tale.

“His name…is Rickon, in honour of our liege lords the Starks of Winterfell”, he explained further. “He is fair of skin and his hair is a reddish-brown colour”.

The oldest man cocked his head and gave Jon a look bordering on suspicion.

“We do not share the same mother”, added Jon.

The man appeared to relax slightly and then he turned to the other men but they shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders in response.

But then, Jon was feeling emboldened enough to reveal one last bit of information.

“He may be accompanied by a direwolf, brother to mine own…a black, menacing beast with green eyes”, he said.

Val stared at him in surprise. She mouthed the words “are you sure”?

Jon nodded before she relayed this final bit of information.

One of the men showed signs of recognition in his eyes and he leaned forward excitedly to share what he knew with Val.

“He says he has heard tales of such a beast roaming the woods they call the Grizzled Pines”, she said, “about ten leagues west of here”.

Jon let out a slow breath and nodded his thanks to the man.

Armed with further instructions as to how to find these woods, they parted company with their Skagosi hosts and turned their sights west, following the rays of the slowly sinking sun.

After trekking for a couple of hours they stopped in a small wooded area where they sheltered for the night. After dawn’s first rays woke them, they set off again, forging a trail across moors and over hillocks towards the west.

The winds stirred up the snow in the early afternoon and they found themselves gripping their furs more tightly as they trudged through the mounting snowdrifts. Even Ghost was struggling to pick his way through the deepening snow.
When they came upon a wooded area they changed tack in order to seek respite from the harsh and bitter winds.

Val took a deep breath and leaned against the pock-marked trunk of a tree… gnarled and twisted as if, it too, had tried over the years to find relief from the unrelenting gales.

“That wind”, she wheezed, “it fair takes your breath away with it”.

“Aye”, replied Jon as he raised his eyes, seeking the overhead sun. He welcomed the relief the trees offered but was anxious about losing sight of the pale yellow orb in the sky and ending up traveling around in circles.

They journeyed for a few more hours, ducking under low-hanging branches, while listening to the wind as it screamed overhead. Dark clouds were amassing in the sky until they blotted out the last vestiges of the sun.

“It’s best we stop here for the night”, said Jon.

They were gathering boughs of evergreen for their shelter when Jon stiffened and glanced over at Ghost who stood stock still with his ears flattened and his tail swaying.

“What is it?” asked Val but Jon shook his head mutely and held a finger to his lips.

Val peered in the direction that both man and beast were staring intently but could see nothing. But within a few seconds she heard something brush up against some branches and some twigs snapping.

Ghost took a few tentative steps forward and bared his teeth while Jon withdrew Longclaw and lowered himself into a fighting stance. Then Val slid an arrow from her quiver and reached down to pick up her bow.

The huffing and snorting noise announced the creature before it came thundering out of the bush. It was a squat, shaggy beast with a thick, leathery hide and a horn mounted on its snout between its two piggy eyes. It was a queer sight, made all the more comical by the small, elderly man who sat astride the strange creature. He was dressed in ragged furs and wore a battered helm atop his shock of long, white hair.

“Whoa”, shouted the man as he tugged on the reins. The beast halted in its tracks and pawed provocatively at the snow as it fixed Ghost within its sights.

“Ghost…no”, shouted Jon as his direwolf took a few steps closer to the beast as the creature lowered its head. The horn looked sharp enough to skewer Ghost and rip out an organ or two in the process.

The man dismounted the beast and patted it on its head. The creature snorted, standing its ground, while regarding Ghost with baleful eyes.

The man removed his helm and stuck out a hand.

“You can put away your weapons”, said the man. “Patsy and I mean you no harm”.

To Jon’s surprise, the man was speaking in the Common Tongue.

Jon sheathed Longclaw and straightened up before proffering his hand and introducing himself and Val to the strange man.

“A bastard child of the northern mainland”, said the man softly who gave his name as Marlyn,
declining to give a last name as it was deemed unnecessary.

To Jon’s surprise, he reached up and took Jon’s chin in his roughened hand, twisting it from side to side as he examined Jon’s features. Then he uttered a low whistle.

“Sired by a Stark, I’ll wager”, said Marlyn with utter certainty in his voice. “Lord Brandon perhaps?”

Jon shook his head after Marlyn dropped his hand to his side.

“Lord Eddard was my father”, he replied.

Marlyn clucked his tongue softly and shook his head.

“My wife always maintained that it was the quiet ones who were bound to surprise you”, he said.

Marlyn glanced at the blackening sky.

“There’s a fierce nor’easter brewing and I expect it’ll be bringing a lot of snow with it”, he said. “You’re both welcome to spend the night in my little hut. It’s not far from here…I was on my way home when we met”.

Jon and Val glanced at each other before nodding in agreement. The temperature was dropping rapidly as the wind was picking up strength. Perhaps it would be more prudent to accept this stranger’s hospitality than risk freezing to death outside.

As the man mounted his odd-looking steed, Val felt emboldened to ask the question both she and Jon had poised on their lips.

“Is this…is this a unicorn?” she queried as she gestured towards the creature.

Marlyn smiled and leaned forward to stroke the creature’s hairy snout.

“Aye, milady”, he said. “Patsy is amongst the very few that still roam this blasted isle. I’ve had her since she was a foal and now she is as old and rheumy as myself. But she’s still a spirited beast for all her afflictions”.

He turned his attention to Ghost who still bristled and snarled at a safe distance.

“Now that”, continued Marlyn as he kicked at Patsy’s sides as a signal to move forward,” is a rare sight to see. Direwolves were hunted out of existence many years ago during the period of the last winter. At first they were competition for the game that was growing scarcer as the long night wore on. Then they became a source of food themselves when nowt else could be found”.

Ghost remained close at Jon’s heels. Jon instinctively reached out to grab at Ghost’s ruff and rubbed it affectionately.

“I never thought I’d see another direwolf again but yours is the second one I’ve seen these past few days”, murmured Marlyn as he swayed from side to side astride the plodding unicorn.

Jon halted in his tracks while Val grabbed his hand excitedly.

“Where?” asked Jon. “Where did you see this direwolf?”

Marlyn twisted his head around.

“A couple of hours ride from my home”, he replied. “It was a magnificent black beast…prowling the
woods like a great shadowcat. If it hasn’t hunted out the area then it may still be in the vicinity…I can lead you there in the morning if the storm has abated by then”.

Jon thanked him and accepted his offer.

Marlyn cocked his head at Ghost.

“Relative of his?” he asked.

Jon nodded.

“His brother”, he replied.

“Oh, aye…” said Marlyn somewhat absently. “And who does his brother belong to…presumably the person you are seeking?”

“My brother”, replied Jon, his voice breaking with unexpected emotion.
Chapter 10

It was a tiny one-room cottage filled with peat smoke but there was a stew simmering over the open fire and it was blissfully warm.

Marlyn pulled up a couple of worn wooden crates and bade them sit down before the fire to warm their hands and toes. Then he ladled some stew into pewter bowls and offered them to his guests. They ate quickly…a little too quickly, if they had to admit…and then sat back to enjoy the sensation of having a full belly for the first time that day.

Jon ran his fingers along the base of his bowl and felt the raised edges of some markings. He turned the bowl over in curiosity to find the familiar direwolf sigil of his family’s house.

“Aye”, said Marlyn as he took a puff on his pipe, “I served a time with your grandfather, Lord Rickard. That bowl was part of my soldier’s kit”.

“How long ago was that?” asked Jon.

Marlyn squinted and gazed up at the low rafters.

“Nigh on twenty and two years ago, I reckon”, he replied. “I was released after suffering a near fatal blow which had me seeing double for several moons…nearly pissed meself when it looked like my commander had an identical twin. The man always had it out for me because he hated the Skagosi. Probably lost some relation at sea off the coast of Skagos and blamed us for causing the ship to founder and sink”.

“The Skagosi do have a formidable reputation for luring and plundering passing ships”, commented Val.

“Aye…and and some of it is well-deserved”, he replied candidly. “We live in a harsh, unforgiving land…one in which some feel forced to do shocking things to survive”.

Then he pursed his lips and shook his head slightly before reaching up to a shelf mounted on the wall to bring down an earthenware jug. He blew on it a couple of times before pulling out the stopper with his teeth.

“May I offer you some?” he asked. “It’s not as refined as your wine but it has a definite kick and it will help keep you warm tonight”.

They both gratefully accepted his offer and, following his lead, downed the powerful drink in a couple of gulps as it was not the kind of brew you sipped. It reminded Val of some of the more powerful concoctions that were created north of the wall…burning the back of your throat as it slid down and spreading its warmth throughout your body. She leaned against Jon and enjoyed the warm, fuzzy feeling that the drink left in its wake.

“You mentioned your wife…” began Val.

A melancholy look passed over Marlyn’s face.

“She was taken from me about ten years ago…a disease of the lungs”, he said. “It tore at my heart to see her struggle to take a breath each day until the only sound she could make was a rattling noise deep in her chest. Eventually, I prayed to the Old Gods to take her so that her suffering could stop. She finally passed away peacefully in her sleep the next day…I found her cold and stiff by my side
in the wee hours of the morning”.

He paused for a minute to compose his face and then slapped his knees.

“Well, that’s enough sadness for now”, he said with forced cheeriness. “We’ll down another dram to her memory”.

After a couple of more drinks Val knew she was more than ready for her bed but Marlyn was a garrulous old coot. He regaled them with his tales of his life until it their eyes were too heavy with fatigue to keep them open any longer. He then generously offered the pair of them his own narrow cot for the night but they politely turned him down. Instead, they bedded down on a pile of furs and moth-eaten blankets while Ghost lay down in front of the door as their self-appointed sentry.

The winds continued to wail outside like a banshee singing her song of warning until just before dawn. Then the sun parted the clouds and sent them packing.

So, with a coat of fresh new snow on the ground and the warm rays of the sun at their backs, they set off once again with Marlyn in the lead, seated upon the back of his ornery unicorn.

After slogging through the snow for a few hours, they reached the edge of a stand of ancient pine trees, so tall that they looked like they could reach up and pluck the sun from the sky. Marlyn halted his steed and gestured towards the woods.

“This is where I last saw the direwolf you seek…and this is where I must leave you”, he said. “Patsy and I are too old to stray very far from home these days so it is time for us to turn around”.

Jon shook his hand and thanked him profusely for all his hospitality and assistance.

“I was happy to help, lad”, replied Marlyn. “I still have a soft spot in my heart for the Starks… especially for your Aunt Lyanna. She saved me from many a beating by standing up to the bullies even though she was just a wee bit of a thing… such a tragic end for a beautiful young girl so full of life.”

He shook his head and took up the reins.

“Stay true to each other and remember that all the riches in the world mean nothing if you don’t have anyone to share them with”, he said as he leaned over to pat the unicorn on the head. Patsy raised her snout and grunted in reply.

They waved off the old man and his beast and turned towards the dark wooded area.

“If Ghost senses Shaggy then we’ll know he’s not far”, said Jon.

The three of them entered the woods cautiously. The trees were densely packed together which meant that the snow on the ground was not as deep, making their progress that much quicker. Apart from the occasional chirp from one of the hardy birds that chose to winter over in this blighted isle, it was as silent as a tomb.

Ghost kept his nose gliding barely above the surface of the snow with Jon and Val keeping a wary watch. As the wind passed through the majestic pines, their tree tops bowed and let fall a dusting of snow that sprinkled the forest floor.

After a couple of hours of fruitless wandering, Val ordered a halt and plopped down in the snow against the trunk of a tree.
“He’s clearly moved on to better hunting grounds so what now?” she asked.

Jon squatted down beside her.

“First we eat and then we discuss where we go from here”, he replied.

Jon opened the pack and took out what was left of the provisions that they had brought with them. Val divided up the rations with her knife and passed a portion to Jon.

Ghost circled around them, still with his nose to the ground. Suddenly he stopped and raised his nose in the air. Then he opened his mouth wide to deliver a silent howl.

Jon stopped chewing, his eyes darting from left to right and then fixed his eyes on Ghost again. He carefully put away the food and stood up, brushing away the snow from his leggings. Then he held out a hand to Val.

“Come”, he said, “He’s here”.

Val looked at him wearily and then at Ghost, skepticism washing over her face.

“Where?” she asked suspiciously as she glanced around her, preferring not to budge unless she absolutely had to.

Then a distant howl of a wolf startled her and chased away her disbelief. She shoved the remaining food in the pack and scrambled to her feet.

“Lead on then”, she said, nodding at Ghost.

Ghost began to pick up the pace almost immediately so that Jon and Val were pressed hard to keep up.

“Ghost”, Jon panted, “slow down a little”.

But Ghost began to gallop faster, sending up sprays of snow until he disappeared into the brush. Jon and Val pounded after him, pushing away the undergrowth, tripping over hidden tree roots.

Jon was about to call out again in frustration when they heard the howling close at hand. But before he could respond Ghost reappeared with what could initially be perceived as his shadow.

Jon fell to his knees with joy and relief and held out his hand.

The coal black direwolf with the emerald green eyes approached Jon cautiously at first. He watched Jon for a minute before taking a hesitant few steps closer. Then he sniffed at Jon’s open palm before taking a quick lick while Jon remained calm and still.

Then Ghost nudged impatiently at Shaggy’s flank. Go on, brother…the gesture seemed to say…he’s one of ours.

Slowly the black direwolf’s tail began to wag as he licked more enthusiastically at Jon’s palm again. Jon smiled and raised his hand to pat Shaggy’s head before rising to his feet. Then he let out a slow breath and turned to Val.

“Ready for the next part of our journey?” he asked.

Val felt her energy renewed. She grabbed Jon’s shoulders and planted a big wet kiss on his lips.
“I’m more than ready…lead on boys”, she replied with a wave of her hand.

It was dusk when they reached the outskirts of a village. Shaggy and Ghost began to slow down until they reached a small, dilapidated cottage that was set apart from the others.

Jon rapped on the door at first but received no response. Then Shaggy whined loudly and scratched at the door a few times until they could hear movement from within. The door was opened no more than an inch and a woman peered out from the crack. She glanced from the direwolves and then to Jon and Val’s expectant faces before pulling the door open wider.

“I’ve been waiting for one of you to come for him”, said Osha. “I’m guessing you’re the bastard brother”.

“Aye”, replied Jon as he thrust out his hand to her, “and I’ve come to take him home”.

She ushered them in to the little hovel. A small, pale boy with auburn curls and bright blue eyes sat at a small, battered trestle table, spooning gruel into his mouth. He laid aside his spoon as the visitors entered and eyed them sullenly. Then he turned to Osha and spoke to her a few words in the Old Tongue to which she replied in kind.

Rickon slid off his stool, shaking his head violently, before grabbing her skirts and hanging on dearly. Then he thrust a finger in his mouth, his eyes wide and fearful.

Jon looked on helplessly. It was obvious that Rickon, at that moment, had no recollection of his former life.

Val nudged at Jon.

“You’re going to have to win him over and quickly…we can’t just steal the child without attracting a lot of attention”, she whispered.

Jon nodded and knelt down in front of his little brother.

“Rickon…please, it’s me, Jon”, he said softly. “Remember when I used to carry you about on my shoulders? Remember when you would flee to my bed when the thunder roared and lightning lit up the sky? Remember Old Nan telling us that it was only an old giant stomping about the countryside, waving his torch, as he searched for his lost sheep?”

Rickon shook his head and held up a hand, palm out, making it clear he wished Jon to not come any closer.

Val made a sound of exasperation, turned towards the door and wrenched it open to usher in the direwolves. Then she leaned over between them, placing a hand on each of their backs.

“Brothers”, she said in the Old Tongue as she jerked her chin from one to the other.

Then she stood up and took Jon’s hand.

“Brothers”, she repeated, nodding first at Jon, then at Rickon.

Rickon looked anxiously at Osha who nodded.

“Family”, she said as she placed a hand on her chest. Then she gestured towards Jon.

“Family”, she repeated.
Rickon’s chin began to tremble as he realized that his tiny world had suddenly expanded and it was too much to absorb. Tears began to course down his cheeks.

Osha made hushing noises and bent down to pick him up, wiping the tears away with her sleeve. Then Rickon threw his arms around her neck and buried his face against her shoulder, sobbing loudly.

Jon rocked back on his heels and stood up silently, watching Osha rock his little brother gently until the boy’s sobs dissolved into hiccups.

“I know I should have prepared him”, said Osha quietly, “but it seemed easier to let him believe that I was the only family he had in the world”.

Jon understood and nodded. Until Arya reappeared in his life, he was almost convinced that he, too, was without kin.

Osha lowered Rickon down to the floor and cupped his small face in her hands.

“You…you must return home with your brother now”, she said.

“No!” cried Rickon, his red rimmed eyes flashing in anger.

A battle of wills ensued as Rickon lashed out at Osha and beat away at her hands with his tiny fists. His cries grew louder as she tried to calm him down until finally Jon had had enough.

“Rickon Stark”, said Jon in a loud, stern voice, “stop being so disrespectful and obey Osha”.

Rickon looked startled and looked at Jon with fresh eyes. Although it wasn’t clear that Rickon understood Jon’s words, it was clear that the tone and timbre of his voice was evoking some powerful memories from deep within the recesses of Rickon’s mind. His body slackened and he appeared shamefaced as he slowly lowered his hands to his sides.

“He has very little in the way of possessions”, said Osha as she stroked Rickon’s hair. “I can have him ready to leave by morning”.

Jon laid a hand on her arm.

“Will you not come with us?” he asked in a pleading manner. “There will always be a place of honour for you at Winterfell…it’s the very least we can do”.

She glanced down at the child, her eyes damp and shining with affection. She was silent for a few seconds before replying.

“I…I don’t rightly know what I’d do with meself without him”, she said. “I’ve made a life for both of us here but it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to pick up sticks and move on”.

She smiled brightly and pulled Rickon closer to her side, nodding mutely at Jon.

They left shortly after first light on the back of a cart pulled by an ox with bones protruding through its scarred hide. Osha had gifted her home and its contents to one of her neighbours who, in return, agreed to take all of them to the coast in time to meet the ship for the journey back to the mainland. The neighbour was grateful for her gift as it meant providing much needed space for his son’s growing family.

The ox placidly pulled the rickety cart through well-worn ruts in the road, seemingly oblivious to the
two direwolves that trotted by its side.

Rickon was silent as he leaned against Osha’s shoulder. He watched the passing scene with a look of resignation on his face. Jon tried to engage him in conversation but his words appeared to fall on deaf ears.

When they reached the coast at twilight, the offshore winds were blowing bitter and strong. After disembarking, Osha thanked the neighbour for his kindness and forebearance and bid him a safe return to his family.

While Osha fussled over Rickon, Jon and Val scanned the horizon seeking the dark outline of Saan’s ship and its distinctive three masts. They expected to seek it moored about a mile off shore but the only sight they could see were the purplish clouds massing in the sky.

Jon searched for the familiar landmarks to confirm the location of their initial landing and was satisfied that they had been dropped off in the correct place. He uttered an oath under his breath while Val looked uneasy.

“The winds are strong tonight”, she suggested. “Perhaps the ship has drifted…let’s head towards that rocky point to see if we can catch sight of them from there”.

As they drew closer to the point of land they could hear the shouts and cries getting louder. And as they stood on the headland, their hearts sank into their bellies when they caught sight of a ship listing badly to one side, half submerged in the frigid, murky waters, its center mast snapped in half.

The offshore ice was alive with dark shapes and pinpricks of torches. Jon could only guess that the Skagosi had already plundered the disabled ship and were making off with the contents of its hold.

“I’m going down to see if there are any survivors”, shouted Jon above the roar of the wind. But Val grabbed his hand and yanked him back.

“It’s too dangerous”, she replied.

Jon stayed put for a minute, flexing his fingers and staring out towards the water. Then he shook his head.

“I can’t…I can’t just stand here and watch and do nothing”, he said. “They came back here for us. I’m well aware that Saan knew the risks and was handsomely paid for it but if there is any chance that one of the crew is still alive down there then the least I can do is try to pull him ashore”.

“Wait”, shouted Val before Jon began the steep descent. “I’m coming with you”.

While Osha and Rickon remained on the headland, Jon and Val staggered and slipped down the rocky path, hand in hand, until they reached the shore. Hordes of people, laden with crates and barrels of goods meant for delivery to the mainland, ignored Jon and Val as they were too intent on getting their ill-gotten gains to safety.

Jon and Val pushed their way through the crowd and ventured out on to the ice. They slithered along in spots but otherwise the fresh snow provided some traction, although they were intensely wary of the sounds of cracking and groaning beneath their feet. They could hear desperate cries echoing over the waters and dark shapes bobbing up and down amidst the waves.

The ice grew thinner the closer they drew to the ship and Val’s grip on Jon’s arm became like a vice.

“Help me”, came a weak piteous cry.
Jon scanned the black water looking for a clue and saw the frozen fingers gripping the edge of the ice a short distance away. He motioned to Val to hang on to him as he slid a few feet towards the crusty edge. He knelt down and probed the frozen fingers and immediately a pale face shot up out of the choppy waters.

“Gods save me”, gasped the sailor, before slipping beneath the waves once more.

Jon grabbed the man’s hand and began to pull on him. The man thrashed around violently, almost yanking Jon into the water with him. But Val refused to let go…digging her heels into the ice, over laden with crusty snow, to brace herself and wrapping her arms around Jon’s waist.

Within seconds they had pulled the man up on to the ice. His lips were blue and trembling while his face was ashen grey. His eyes stared as if the horror of nearly drowning in the frigid waters would be frozen on his face for eternity.

They half dragged him through the scattered crowds to the safety of the shore where Osha, Rickon and the direwolves met them after having clambered down the steep cliff. Osha threw some furs over the man who clutched at them as if they were his only link to life.

Val glanced up and noticed an orange glow emanating from the ship. Then she heard a loud groan as the ship slipped deeper into the icy waters. She nudged Jon and pointed.

“They’ve scuttled the ship”, she shouted. The flames licked higher, emitting billows of black, acrid smoke that drifted over the ice. They could hear the screams and splashes as any remaining seaman dove over the sides of the rapidly sinking ship.

“We can’t just let them drown”, declared Jon as he turned towards the black smoke that wafted towards them.

Val had just turned around and was about to tell him to wait for her but her words died on her lips as she saw him disappear into the dark swirling mass. Then the ice growled and cracked before she heard a shattering noise.

“Jon”, she screamed into the empty void. “Where are you?”

He was disoriented at first. He could hear her screams fading in and out while all around him was darkness. His hands and feet felt stiff and unyielding. His lungs strained to burst from his chest, hungry for air. And then there was the cold…the unrelenting cold. A change stole over him, life was exchanging itself for something else…and a sense of calm and numbness slowly overtook his body.

He knew he was dying and he felt like nothing. And then he lost all the nothing that he had become.

At first, he felt the guttural growl building deep within him, like a wounded animal lashing out in pain and anger. Then he felt like a fire had been lit in his chest and he could feel the rhythmic pounding of his heart steadily growing louder until it was almost deafening. But when he tried to power his arms and legs they were still devoid of all feeling. Then, without warning, he felt himself dragged slowly upwards, gripped by an unseen hand. As he broke through the surface of the water, he was dimly aware of the chorus of anxious voices and felt several hands clutching at his soggy clothes as they dragged him to on to the ice and rolled him over on his side. He vomited up copious amounts of salty water as he felt the pounding of fists both big and small on his back and chest.

When he finally pried open his eyes, Val’s face swam into view, framed by the black mist that threatened to swallow her.

“I thought you’d gone and left me forever”, she whispered fiercely as she pulled the furs up around his ears. Hot tears streamed down her face and fell on to his frozen cheeks.
He struggled to form words but they became mangled under his tongue and died in his throat. His eyes looked at her beseeingly.

“Ghost”, she said with a nod at the sodden direwolf. “He dove in and dragged you back from your watery grave”.

Rickon bowed down before him. Jon blinked rapidly as he saw the fear and concern in his little brother’s eyes. Rickon reached out tentatively and touched Jon’s face with his small, warm hand.

“Brother”, he said haltingly, searching for the words in a language he had almost forgotten. “do not go…stay with me”.

Jon smiled as best he could while trying to still his chattering teeth and was rewarded for his efforts as the corners of Rickon’s mouth slowly tugged upwards into a lopsided grin that reminded Jon so achingly of Robb. He laid his chilly fingers over Rickon’s hand.

“I won’t leave you again”, he whispered hoarsely.
Chapter 11

Jon scowled as he watched Val smile triumphantly at the innkeeper while the man’s eyes strayed to her swelling breasts.

The innkeeper gestured for them to enter his ill-kept establishment and then disappeared behind a small wooden door. Val sighed with relief and turned to Jon.

“You can wipe that sour look off your face, Jon”, she said. “I’ve promised him nowt but cold, hard coin. And seeing as how we need two rooms and he’s not likely to receive any more custom tonight I negotiated a more favourable rate”.

This was their last chance to find shelter for the night in this place that passed as a town. The other inns had turned them away, citing that they were either full or that the direwolves would spook the other guests.

The innkeeper gestured towards an unoccupied table and then disappeared briefly before reappearing within a few minutes later bearing a tray of steaming bowls of stew and a half loaf of bread that were plopped unceremoniously on the scarred wooden table. He then muttered a few words in the Old Tongue before swiftly departing the room once more. Jon prodded at grey pieces of meat and sighed before taking a tentative bite. It was surprisingly not as vile as he anticipated.

They exchanged few words as they ate. An elderly man dozed by the fire, his grunts and snuffles breaking the long silences in between.

The innkeeper returned just as they finished their meal.

“How long do you reckon you’ll be staying?” he asked he stacked up the empty bowls and swept the crumbs to the floor.

“Just until we can find passage to the mainland”, replied Osha.

The innkeeper grunted and shook his head.

“There’ll be nowt going between here and the mainland now that winter’s come”, he said with a loud sniff. “Skagos aint got no warm water port so the ships can’t get near without being crushed by the ice”.

He registered their looks of dismay as he cradled the dishes in his arms and his expression softened.

“Look… if you’re desperate enough to get away you could always make your way to Skane”, he said.

Osha gave him a puzzled look.

“Why would we go to Skane?” she asked. “The place is deserted and even further away”.

The innkeeper chuckled and set the dirty dishes down.

“Now that’s what they want you to think”, he said in a low voice. “But there are those who use Skane as a hideout, of sorts…a place to launch their boats…or conceal them, for that matter, away from the prying eyes of the authorities. The currents that flow past the southeast side are warmer while the land is indented by small, sheltered coves…perfect for fisher folk and villains alike.”
Mayhaps you’ll be able to find somebody to take you home”.

Osha glanced at Val who was rapidly translating the man’s words to Jon.

“How do we get there?” asked Osha.

The man looked over at the elderly man. Then he walked over and stood in front of the man before nudging at his feet.

“Oy…granddad…wake up”, yelled the innkeeper.

The old man startled and snorted before opening his eyes.

“What do you reckon, granddad…is it safe to cross the ice to Skane just yet?” asked the innkeeper.

The elderly man blinked several times before replying.

“Oh…aye…I expect the ice where the strait narrows might be strong enough by now to support a man’s weight”, he replied in a quavering voice.

Val could feel her heart begin to quicken at the thought of setting out across frozen sea ice. She laid her fingers across Jon’s hand as she translated the man’s words and she could feel him tense up before nodding.

“And where is this place where tis said the ice is safe to cross?” asked Osha.

“I can take you there”, replied the old man as he struggled to rise from his chair. Within seconds the innkeeper was by the old man’s side, grasping his arm and placing a hand at his back to help guide him to his feet.

“You’re too old, granddad”, the innkeeper admonished him.

The old man shook his head.

“Nonsense”, he said as he gingerly stretched his limbs. “Besides, it would be an excuse to visit your aunt. I could take her some supplies…otherwise she’s bound to die of starvation before we see the arse end of winter”.

“Take the boy with you, then”, said the innkeeper. “If nothing else you’ll need him to look after the horses”.

Arrangements were made for their departure in the morning before they were led to their rooms for the night.

There was urgency to Jon’s lovemaking that night that initially Val put down to lack of opportunity over the past few days. Apart from the odd grope and quick kiss, they hadn’t been very intimate as of late. But when he entered her for the second time she swore she could see fire burning in his eyes and she wasn’t sure that it wasn’t just the reflection of the dying flames on the grate.

“I believe your brush with death has made you more passionate”, she whispered as he rolled off her. “Mayhaps you’ve undergone a sea change”.

He grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers.

“Mayhaps I’ve realized how short and precious life is…that you have to take what pleasure you can before it’s snatched away from you”, he said with a yawn.
Val nestled closer to him and rested her head against his shoulder. She waited until she was sure he was asleep before laying her fingers on his forehead for a few seconds after smoothing away his curls first. She listened to his slow, shallow breathing then laid her head against his chest to listen to the strong thumping of his heart. He was normally warm to the touch but lately he seemed to burn hotter than usual. She had feared that he had taken ill and was trying to hide it from her and the others. But after reassuring herself yet again that he was well enough, she joined him in slumber.

After settling their account in the morning, the innkeeper introduced them to his son, a pale, silent lad not much younger than Jon. He had already hitched up a sleigh to a couple of mangy horses. After bidding their host farewell, they set off cross country in the direction of the island of Skane with the direwolves bringing up the rear.

They stopped at midday to take a meal at a dilapidated inn and rest the horses.

As they entered the establishment, the quiet drone of conversation ceased as all eyes turned towards them, assessing them silently.

As they pushed their way towards a vacant table, one of the patrons grabbed Jon’s sleeve.

“All right, all right gents”, a booming voice was heard. “We don’t want to start any trouble here”.

The burly landlord shouldered his way in between Jon and the other patrons who had risen to their feet and were surrounding the party of newcomers.

“Siddown…alluvya”, snarled the landlord with a menacing glare. Then he pulled out a couple of chairs with a loud scrape and gestured to the women to take a seat. Then he turned to scan the room with narrowed eyes for a few seconds before leaning in to speak to the newcomers.

“They know you’re from away”, he said quietly. “So my suggestion is to keep your eyes in your sockets and your hands in your pockets…if you get my drift. Don’t tarry any longer than you needs to and I’ll watch out for you when you leave. Most of this lot are poor but decent folk but there are some I wouldn’t trust around my dog…and she’s a mean, vicious cur”.

Jon started to grumble when Val closed her hand over his wrist to stop him.

“Thank you”, she said. “We’ll heed your advice”.

The rest of their meal passed without incident. The landlord, true to his word, kept a watchful eye over the troublemakers, swiftly tossing out the most belligerent among and jollying the others along with loud japes and friendly back slaps. However, despite his best efforts, the prevailing atmosphere was one of ugliness mixed with despair.

When they set off again, silence replaced chatter, broken only by the snorting of the horses and the clopping of their hooves. They stared out at the bleak countryside before them. Rocks jutted out of the snow covered fields like angry fists and the trees were strangely stunted with their trunks twisted and canopies bowed against the harsh winds that swirled around them.

From time to time they caught sight of a weirwood grove, their bright red leaves the only spot of colour in a land dominated by white and grey. When he saw them for the first time, Jon was tempted to call a temporary halt to their journey to offer a prayer to the Old Gods but Osha’s agitated reaction
gave him pause.

“Their gods are not our gods”, she said, sounding vaguely ominous. “They demand more than words”.

When they tasted the salt on their lips they knew they were drawing close to the strait that separated the two islands.

Jon and Val stood on the cliff edge of the craggy shore and surveyed the icy expanse that separated the two islands. They watched the innkeeper’s boy and the old man as they stumbled and slid down the embankment until they reached the water’s edge, the boy carrying a long staff which had been sharpened at one end.

They stared at the ice silently before the old man took a few slow steps forward on to the ice, still clinging to the boy.

Grasping the staff in both hands, the boy drilled and twisted the sharpened end through the ice and withdrew it once he reached a certain depth. Then he passed it to the old man who examined it carefully. Then, after conferring with the boy, the old man turned once again to those who remained safely on shore.

“The ice is thick enough to cross”, he called out, his thin reedy voice ringing with confidence.

They scrambled down the embankment to join the man and the boy. Then the old man had a few parting words of advice.

“Watch and listen carefully as you cross”, he explained. “Turn back if you see any signs of water or if cracks or holes appear. Keep this ditty in mind until you reach the other side…thick and blue, tried and true; thin and crispy, way too risky”.

He then instructed them to follow the shoreline southeast.

“And where do we find the people we seek?” asked Val.

The old laid a gnarly hand upon her shoulder.

“Oh, lass…you needn’t bother knowing where to find them”, he said, “because they’ll find you long before you get there”.

Then, with a cackle, he and the boy mounted the sleigh and bid them all farewell.

They turned towards the island of Skane, its far shore shrouded in a grey mist.

“It’s now or never”, murmured Jon.

Val gave him a crooked smile and tucked her arm around his.

“If we go down then we go down together”, she said with a toss of her head.

The direwolves were the first to cross, plunging ahead heedlessly. Jon and Val were next, gliding along more cautiously while Osha and Rickon brought up the rear.

The wind swept across the open expanse and they shivered in its wake. At times, Val heard moans and she wondered if it was just the wind whistling past her ears…or if something that once haunted her childhood dreams now lurked beneath the sea ice, waiting for her to plunge through the ice into its waiting jaws.
Anxiety welled in Val’s chest as they reached the midway point. She glanced back nervously at the receding shore of Skagos before setting her sights on Skane once more. Jon tightened his grip on her arm.

“There’s no turning back now”, he said.

They continued to move forward. The direwolves were now completely lost to sight and Jon uttered a silent prayer that they had already reached the safety of solid ground.

They were within a few hundred feet of the nearest beach when Jon called a halt.

“The ice…it looks white rather than blue”, he said.

Val glanced at the sky.

“It could be just a trick of the light”, she said as she tried to put her fears aside.

Jon bade them remain still while he took a few hesitant paces forward. They could hear the cracking noises when he took his third step.

Val uttered a few choice oaths while Osha pulled Rickon closer.

They all stared at each other, seemingly frozen in time and space.

Val swallowed.

“I say we make a dash for it”, she said huskily. “What choice do we have…we can’t stay here and we can’t go back”.

Jon glanced at Osha who nodded, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Jon knelt down and held out his arms to Rickon.

Osha pushed Rickon into Jon’s waiting arms. Jon swung Rickon up and onto his broad shoulders.

“Hang on tight”, he said as he grasped his little brother’s hands.

Then they all took a few more steps towards the beckoning shore.

“Run”, shouted Jon as they heard the ice begin to snap.

They felt the ice begin to give way as they raced towards the shore, their hearts pounding in their throats. Water lapped at their feet as they stumbled over the cracks that were forming on the surface.

They were within a few feet of the beach when they heard a crack that split the air, followed by a loud groan. Osha screamed as she slid into the icy waters. Rickon began to panic and boxed Jon’s ears before the ice beneath them collapsed and they all fell into the water.

Osha was the first to stand up and wade ashore, dragging Val behind her.

“I would kiss these stones if I wasn’t so bloody cold”, said Val as she threw herself down on the ground.

Jon dropped beside her and wrapped his arms around her, cradling her in his arms until she finally stopped shaking.
“We need to find shelter and dry ourselves by a fire before we freeze to death”, he murmured.

They moved inland until they found an abandoned cottage. Part of the roof had caved in and there was snow piled up beneath but the fireplace was intact. They cleared away the animal scat and nesting materials and found some tattered blankets and rusty utensils. Then they ate their soggy provisions while they dried themselves by the roaring fire before curling up together for the night.

They set out just after first light, heading towards the rising sun until they reached the water’s edge once more. They walked along the shore with Rickon scampering ahead to pick up small rocks and bits of debris. Occasionally he would pause and scan the wooded area that lined the beach for signs of Shaggydog but the direwolves had yet to join them. Rickon shrugged and carried on. Jon, too, knew that Ghost had not strayed far but would return once he tired of hunting.

Rickon was the first to pick up their scent. He crouched down and tilted his head towards the woods.

Jon stopped and slowly pulled Longclaw from his scabbard. Val noticed the faint telltale whistle while Osha nervously fingered the knife at her hip.

“What the fuck are ya doin’ ‘ere?” demanded a disembodied voice.

Jon narrowed his eyes and scanned their surroundings for clues to the man’s whereabouts. Then, without warning, four men burst from the trees brandishing knives and clubs. They advanced, snarling and spitting, upon Jon, Val and Osha who now stood shoulder to shoulder. Jon raised his sword and shifted his weight on to his front foot while Val squinted as she pulled back on her bow.

They could smell the foulness of the men’s breath when they heard a high, childish howl as Rickon threw himself with all his fury at the man closest to him. He kicked him in the groin and sank his teeth into another’s wrist before being tossed aside.

Osha lunged forward to grab the still flailing Rickon while the men, to Jon’s surprise, roared with laughter. He stepped in front of Rickon and Osha to protect them while Val, her nerves and muscles strained to the limit, loosened her grip before the bow string cut her fingers.

As the laughter died down, the man whose wrist had been bitten examined the bite marks before stepping forward.

“Quite the little wolf pup you’re got there”, he said.

Then his voice dropped, the timbre taking on a more menacing quality.

“So I say again…what the fuck are ya doin’ ‘ere?” he repeated.

Jon stared back at the man, unflinching in his gaze.

“Quite the little wolf pup you’re got there”, he said.

Then his voice dropped, the timbre taking on a more menacing quality.

“So I say again…what the fuck are ya doin’ ‘ere?” he repeated.

Jon stared back at the man, unflinching in his gaze.

“Don’t come any closer”, said Jon softly as the man took another step forward. Then the man heard the low growl behind him and spun around.

He gasped and paled as he stared at the blood dripping from Shaggydog’s slavering jaw.

Then Ghost silently rounded in front of the men, his tail swishing and his red eyes glowing. One of the men dropped his knife and fell to his knees.

“Fuck me”, whispered the man, the fear shining in his eyes. “To be sure he belongs to the Old Gods, this one”.

Jon lowered his sword slightly.

“We’re seeking somebody to take us to the mainland”, said Jon curtly. “Do you know of anyone who can provide us passage?”

“Mebbe”, muttered the man with the bitten wrist, rubbing his injury without taking his eyes off Shaggydog.

“Then take us to him and you won’t get hurt”, said Jon.

The bitten man shifted his glance from Shaggydog to Jon and then nodded.

“Awright then”, he replied simply. Then he kicked at the man who still knelt on the ground.

“Get up, ya daft plank”, he growled. “We’re taking them to see Rainwyn”.

They were led to a small cove where a couple of ships were anchored off-shore. Several fishing boats crowded the shore where, stood upon the long dock that jutted out into the water, their owners chatted while gutting their catch at a long wooden table.

There was ice and snow hugging the shoreline but otherwise the water remained open and placid in this sheltered area.

The encampment was a mix of temporary and more or less permanent shelters. They were taken to the largest hut which appeared to double as both a drinking establishment and meeting hall.

“The wolves stay outside”, said the man with the bitten wrist, “including the little one”.

Jon leaned forward.

“The wolves go where they please”, he said. He’d had enough of the man’s bullying tactics and could sense the small prey that cowered within him.

"Suit yerself", said the man with a shrug.

They were ushered into a smoky room accompanied by Ghost while Shaggydog elected to remain outside.

They were introduced to the man called Rainwyn, reputedly the owner and captain of one of the ships near the cove. He bid Jon sit down while the women were ordered to take a seat by the fire. He supped his drink slowly as he tried to ignore Rickon who had clambered on to Jon’s knee. Ghost circled the room twice before lying down next to Jon.

“Who are you?” asked Rainwyn. “I need to know a man’s name before I do business with him”.

Jon felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck as he heard the door open and close. He watched Ghost’s reaction from the corner of his eye but the direwolf did not move. Jon relaxed.

“My name is Jon Snow”, he replied. “My family and I became stranded on Skagos and now need to return to White Harbour. Can you help us?”

Rainwyn shifted his gaze to Rickon who was playing with the captain’s pipe.

“This one be yours?...you look a little too young to be his father”, commented Rainwyn as he leaned back in his chair.
“He’s my brother…our father is dying and wishes to see him before he passes”, snapped Jon.

He jerked his head towards Osha.

“That’s his mother sat over there with my wife”, he continued.

Rainwyn licked his lips.

“Oh aye…and who be your father, then?” he asked. He had a hungry look on his face.

Jon quickly tried to summon up the names of other northern lords.

“Lord Roger Ryswell of The Rills”, he replied.

“He’s lying”, said a voice from behind.

Jon swiveled to see a young woman leaning against the closed door. She was tall and slender, clad in men’s clothing, with short black hair and skin that had been roughened by the elements from sea to sky. She had a bemused expression on her face. She strode across the room to stand in front by Rainwyn’s side.

“Look at him”, she said in a low voice. “He’s a Stark bastard if I ever saw one…I’ll swear to it”.

Rainwyn swore and stood up, knocking his chair to the floor in the process. He snatched up his pipe from Rickon’s fingers and downed his drink in one long gulp. Then he leaned over the table, his face a thunderous shade of purple.

“My great-grandfather, his brothers and many of his cousins were killed when they tried to shake off the yoke of Stark rule”, he said before spitting on the floor. “I'll not do a Stark any favours…not in this lifetime nor the next”.

He stormed out of the room, muttering to himself, while Jon watched helplessly with the words “but I’m not a Stark” dying on his lips. But it wouldn’t have mattered because the Skagosi made no such distinction.

The woman picked up the chair and sat down across from Jon and Rickon. Then she thrust out her hand.

“Sorry about that”, she said as Jon stared at her proffered hand.

She awkwardly lowered her hand and allowed it to rest on the table.

“Who in seven hells are you?” asked Jon. “And, why was it any of your business to scuttle any chance I had of getting us home?”

“I’m Asha of House Greyjoy”, she replied. “I’m the captain of the ship Black Wind. I believe you are well acquainted with my little brother…Theon Greyjoy”.

Chapter 12

Jon could hear his blood singing in his ears. He reached out to stroke Ghost’s head and found the direwolf vibrating beneath his hand. The acrid air was hazy from the peat fire that smoldered on the grate and Jon could see plumes of smoke swirling lazily from his nostrils as he let out his breath slowly.

“You’d do well to choose your words carefully when speaking of your brother to me, my lady”, he said, his voice hard, his emotions barely in check.

“Have I touched a nerve…bastard?” she asked, a faint sneer to her voice.

All eyes turned to the heavy wooden door when they heard frantic clawing sounds from the other side. From the corner of his eye, Jon watched Osha quickly rise and wrench it open to confront Shaggydog who crouched menacingly in the doorway. She tried to calm the black beast as he growled softly, the hackles raised on the back of his neck.

Jon felt Val’s hand at his back and the fall of her hair as she bent down to whisper in Rickon’s ear.

“Stand down, little man”, she said, “let’s listen to what she has to say first”.

She had already taken stock of the number of men circulating about the camp and reckoned that the odds of them making it out alive in the eventuality of a concentrated assault were little to none, despite the direwolves being a wild card. Wolves could still be felled by archers with keen eyes and strong, steady arms.

Asha watched Rickon as he slid off his brother’s lap and joined his direwolf, throwing his arms around the heaving creature as it continued to glower. The expression on her face could scarcely be described as misty-eyed but there was an undeniable wistful look to her.

“Theon was about the same age as your little brother when he was taken away from us by your father”, she said. “My father raged for weeks at the loss of his last remaining son while I silently vowed to become both his daughter and son. Eventually he quieted and he spoke no more of Theon…preferring to believe him dead rather than think of him being raised by another”.

Jon leaned forward, breathing more rapidly.

“That, my lady…was a direct result of your father’s folly”, he said. “He gambled and he lost…the forfeiture being the loss of your brother”.

Asha pursed her lips briefly before the corners of her lips formed a sardonic smile.

“You know all about the consequences of a father’s folly…don’t you, bastard”, she said. “Have you ever sought out that tavern slut that birthed you?”

Pretty words and sycophantic overtures had never been the Greyjoy way and yet Jon puzzled over why Asha was openly provoking him. However, he managed to remain still, keenly aware of the weight of Val’s hands as she pressed down on his shoulders, despite the urge to lunge across the table and smack the smirk off Asha’s face.

“What do you want from us…captain?” asked Val calmly.

Asha’s gaze flickered briefly to Val’s face before returning to Jon’s.
“I’m here to make you an offer”, she replied languidly. “I’ll take you back to the mainland on one condition…that you release my brother from whatever deep, dank dungeon you’re holding him in and return him to me immediately”.

She noted the startled looks that passed between Jon and Val.

“Your brother is not in our custody, my lady”, said Jon.

Asha frowned and folded her arms.

“I’ve been reaving up and down the coasts asking anyone who would listen if they had any word of my little brother…and the only news I’ve had is that he languished as a prisoner at Winterfell. Now I know your sisters have taken back Winterfell and sent the Boltons back to whatever hole they crawled out of but there’s been nothing of my brother’s release”, she said in a gruff tone of voice. “So don’t bother lying to me…your family had nothing to gain by letting him go. And if he’s dead then I want his bones sent back to me…he deserves to be returned to the sea, not lying beneath the ground with only worms for company”.

Jon sighed and scrubbed his face.

“He’s gone”, said Jon emphatically.

He leaned forward and told her of Jeyne’s tale of their leap off Winterfell’s walls into the pillowy drifts of snow beneath and his disappearance into the night.

“Your brother was a fool”, said Jon, “he was a fool for betraying my brother and he was a fool for believing he could hold Winterfell against the fury of the north”.

Asha’s lips curled in disdain.

“Aye…you northerners are a vengeful lot”, she said. “And my brother paid a steep price for his betrayal…worse than the iron price. He was stupid and prideful, anxious to prove his worth to our father. But what was done to him went beyond simple revenge”.

She shook her head and glanced at Jon whose eyes remained flinty and cold.

Jon began to rise.

“We’re done here”, he announced. “Time’s a wasting and we need to find another means of getting home”.

As the others gathered up their possessions, he turned to Asha once more.

“If you do find your brother then give him a message from me”, he said softly. “Tell him to stay away from me and my kin or he’ll find himself on the wrong side of a very sharp blade”.

Jon wrenched open the door and felt a blast of cool, salty air. As the others joined him, he heard Asha take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Home”, she said suddenly. “I’ll…I’ll take you back”.

Jon knit his brows together and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He closed the door and leaned against the rough timber.

“Why?” he asked.
She shrugged her shoulders, her eyes lowered as she fiddled with her fingers. Jon frowned. She looks lost, he thought, vulnerable even.

“Everyone deserves a chance to go home again”, she said after a minute’s silence.

Jon remained wary in response to her vague explanation.

“And what’s to stop you from cutting our throats tossing us overboard once we’re at sea?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“You have my word that neither I nor any of my crew will violate our agreement to get you back to the mainland safely”, she replied, “unless there is provocation. I expect and maintain strict discipline on my ship... you and the others will not interfere with my crew and we will do our best to safely deliver you to White Harbour”.

Jon glanced at Val and Osha who nodded in agreement. Then he stuck out his hand to Asha.

“If we can agree on a fair price and then it's a deal”, he said.

Asha shook his hand solemnly before striding over to wrench open the door. Several of her men were already gathered outside.

“Make haste to unfurl and raise the sails, lads...we’re leaving tonight for the mainland”, she cried.

The men raised a cheer before scattering towards the small boats that bobbed in the surf.

The ensuing hours were spent loading supplies on to the Black Wind before they finally set sail just as the pale, buttery sun hovered briefly over the horizon before sinking into the waves. As twilight crept over the western sky, Asha stood at the prow of the ship, barking out orders while the crew scurried about the deck, hauling ropes and securing the sails.

Jon and Val stood nearby, watching the island of Skane recede into the distance. Val rested her head on Jon’s shoulder. The midday meal of fish and brewis was not sitting well and she was focusing her attention on not losing the contents of her belly over the side of the ship while Jon braced himself against the swelling of the waves beneath his feet, happy to feel the bitter saltspray on his face. The harsh, driving wind meant they were drawing ever closer to home.

Asha invited the passengers to join her for the evening meal in her quarters.

“Rainwyn might have relented in the end”, she conceded, her cheeks flushed after several flagons of wine. “He would have taken you and the boy...and he might have allowed the wolves, too. But he would never have allowed the women to come aboard”.

Jon paused with his fork in mid air. He frowned and glanced at Val and Osha. Val was pushing her barely touched meal around her trencher while Osha was coaxing Rickon into eating his food instead of slipping morsels to Shaggydog.

“Why not?” asked Jon.

Asha smiled as she set her cup down on the table.

“The Skaggs are a superstitious lot”, she explained. “Having a woman on board is considered bad luck...an invitation to the gods to rile up the seas or still the breezes”.

She snorted and dissolved into raucous laughter, shaking her head in disbelief. Then she poured
herself more wine and offered Jon a refill which he politely refused. He already felt muzzy from the cramped conditions of the tiny cabin and the strong wine.

Val laid her fork and knife across the plate and offered her excuses. She still felt unwell and longed for her bed, even one that still remained in motion with each swell of a wave. Jon rose to accompany her but she waved him off impatiently.

“No need…I know the way”, she replied, “…although it might take me a while to stagger across the deck and clamber down to the hold”.

“We’ll be following you anon”, said Osha as she ruffled Rickon’s curls. He was curled up by her side with one hand trailing over Shaggy’s back as the direwolf waited patiently for the boy to pass more food to him.

Jon leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers across his belly.

“Where will you go once you’ve dropped us off at White Harbour?” he asked Asha.

She twirled her wine before taking a gulp.

“South…southeast”, she replied. “The waters around Westeros are becoming less and less navigable now that winter has come. Even the trade winds, once pleasant and balmy, now blow with a ferocious intensity, blowing us further and further away from shore”.

Jon watched her quietly, sensing an air of melancholy that dampened her spirit and wondered if it was the drink or something deeper.

“Will you stop off at Pyke before you sail for foreign waters?” he asked.

She shook her head and took another sip.

“No”, she gasped. “That’s not possible”.

Jon cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. She gave him a brief smile.

“I was married off in absentia to a fat, old sealord by my clever Uncle Euron in order to further distance my claim to the Seastone Chair”, she continued. “If I can find my brother and return him to Pyke then, and only then, can I return home. As our father’s only surviving son he is the natural heir to his seat…the Drowned God can take the rest. And once he stakes his claim and sits upon his throne then I will have him annul my marriage and appoint me as his Hand”.

Osha gathered up a sleepy Rickon and bade Jon and Asha goodnight and let the cabin with Shaggydog padding behind them. Then Asha poured more wine, this time insisting that Jon join her before retiring for the night himself.

They heard the cries from outside and seconds later there was a pounding on the door. It was the young cabin boy who was not much older than Rickon, a child with pinched features and a shock of red hair.

“Cap’n…come quick”, he said breathlessly. “the bosun’s mate has been attacked by one of the women”.

Jon and Ghost followed hot on Asha’s heels as she followed the boy out of the cabin to investigate. They discovered the mate lying by the hatch, his arms wrapped around his belly. Blood seeped out a wound and trickled down his forearms and on to the deck. Val stood nearby, clinging to a rope with
one hand while brandishing a knife with the other. Blood spatter and vomit stained her coat. Osha and Rickon flanked her on both sides with Shaggydog growling softly at anyone who came too close.

Some of the men on watch stood nearby, shuffling nervously.

“Fetch the maester, boy”, snarled Asha and she pulled out a handkerchief and knelt down to help staunch the bleeding. “The rest of you return to your stations”.

The man moaned and as she pressed the cloth firmly against his wound. Minutes later the maester arrived and examined the injury.

“It’s only superficial”, he sniffed. “I’ll need a couple of men to take him to my quarters where I’ll get him stitched up in no time”.

Asha held up a hand.

“Not until I determine what happened first”, she growled, staring up at Val.

Jon moved closer to Val, partially shielding her, alert to anyone who tried to approach them.

“He attacked me first”, said Val, raising her chin slightly. “He grabbed me as I raised the hatch. He tried to tear at my clothes but I pulled away from him and gave him a shove. Then he pulled out his dagger but a deep swell threw him off balance and I nicked him in the belly before he could slash at me with his blade”.

Asha stared at her for a few seconds before she reached down and prodded at the mate. He groaned as she pushed him on to his back. The curved blade that lay beneath his body glinted in the moonlight once it was exposed.

Asha stood up, swore and gave the man a swift kick in the ribs. Everyone gasped and the maester mildly rebuked her.

“Fuckin’ idiot”, yelled Asha, “you don’t try to rape a paying passenger”.

The mate yowled in pain and clutched at belly more tightly. The maester glared at her reproachfully until she ordered a couple of the crew to remove the man to the maester’s quarters.

“I can have him flogged in the morning if you like”, she said to Val. “Then leave him tied to the mast with his cock smeared with fish guts so the seagulls can peck at his pecker”.

Val shook her head.

“I reckon he’s suffered enough for now”, she replied. “But I told him I’d geld him if he ever tries it again”.

Asha laughed.

“The whores all along these shores will be devastated by a drop in business if that one ever loses his cock”, she chuckled.

Asha ordered the mate to be placed in irons and put on half rations once the maester had him stitched up.

“And no more wine or ale until further notice”, she added. “Mayhaps he’ll feel less emboldened when his head isn’t so clouded by drink”.
The rest of the journey back to the mainland passed without serious incident. Val gradually regained her sea legs and grew to appreciate the glitter of the sunlight on the roughened waters and the cries of the seabirds as they raced beside the heaving and plunging ship.

Jon rarely left her side, his rather pointed glares making it clear that no man was welcome to come near without permission. She tried to shoo him away at times, growing tired of his constant looming presence but he stubbornly refused.

“I don’t need your protection”, she protested. “I’m quite capable of looking out for myself”.

He raised one of her hands and held it against his cheek.

“I know”, he said quietly. “But I’m yours…and you’re mine. So, for the sake of my peace of mind let me continue to be your shadow…at least until we leave this blasted ship”.

She pursed her lips and nodded.

“As long as you don’t carry on like this after we disembark”, she said. “If I was in want of such devotion then I would have gotten myself a dog”.

Jon smiled one of his rare smiles and began barking and howling until Val told him to hush up as his behaviour was drawing furtive smiles and looks of concern from the crew.

They turned their attentions to Rickon who was now shimmying down the mainmast from his perch in the crow’s nest. One of the riggers had taken him under his wing and had been showing him the ropes, much to Jon’s consternation. So he stood beneath the mast with his arms outstretched, memories of Bran’s near fatal fall still fresh in his mind, ready to catch his little brother should he lose his footing.

The sight of White Harbour had driven Rickon into scaling the mast to view the large port city from the crow’s nest. When he landed on the deck with a thud he excitedly described what he had seen to Osha, gesticulating wildly.

“He saw lots of people crowding the docks…pushing and shoving”, said Val as she rapidly translated his words to Jon. “He says that some were falling into the water while others sat at the water’s edge wailing”.

Jon turned to look at Asha who was standing on the bridge, squinting as she peered at the scene unfolding on shore through her spyglass. Then she bawled out orders to lower the sails before dropping anchor and signaled to a couple of men to lower the yawl to the deck below and have it readied to take on passengers.

“There’s a ruckus happening on the docks…I don’t know what is going on”, she said uneasily to Jon. “I can send some men to accompany you as far as the stores. They have to go ashore to pick up some supplies before we haul anchor for points south”.

Jon accepted her offer before accompanying the others to their quarters to gather up their belongings before reassembling on the deck, ready to depart the ship.

“Thank you, captain”, said Jon as he shook Asha’s hand farewell.

She leaned forward.

“Thank you for not addressing me as my lady again”, she whispered. “Being of noble birth has never been a point of pride with me. But commanding the respect and loyalty of my men has always been
my mainstay”.

She hung on to his hand a second longer than what was considered customary and he knew she had more to say.

“Whatever mercy lies in your heart, Jon Snow…please spare some for my brother”, she said softly.

Jon bowed his head slightly and hesitated before replying.

“If I do learn of his whereabouts then how shall I send word to you?” he asked.

A shy, almost childlike smile crept over her weatherbeaten features.

“Send a message to my uncle, Lord Rodrik Harlaw of the Ten Towers. He’ll know how to reach me”, she replied. “And if, perchance, you are able to speak to my brother…please tell him it’s time for him to come home”.

As they neared the docks, Jon grew increasingly worried by the sight of people crowded along the edges. Asha’s men and the direwolves provided interference as they pushed their way through the throng of people laden down with possessions, arguing loudly and vociferously with the dockhands who vigorously pushed back.

Once they parted company with the crew, Jon could see that the crowd was close to rioting so he swept one arm protectively around Val’s shoulder and grabbed one of Rickon’s hands while Osha clung to the other.

The noise of the desperation abated as they inched their way further inland and the crowds thinned as they made their way through the cobbled streets towards the Merman’s Court, the seat of the Manderly family.

They sat in an antechamber while a servant relayed a message to Lord Manderly that they had arrived.

“Those people on the docks”, said Val, “I think I recognized some of them”.

Jon looked surprised and thought back. He had sensed some familiarity amongst the crowds as they shoved their way through their numbers…whether it was their dress, their gestures or the possessions that they clutched to their chests. And now the realization came to him with Val’s words…many of the Free Folk had come to White Harbour and were frantically trying to leave the shores of Westeros.

The doors swung open and they were ushered into the great hall where Lord Manderly rose from his broad, elaborate seat and threw open his arms.

“Well done, lad”, he said boisterously, “well done, indeed. I feared that you were all dead when I
learned of Saan’s ship foundering upon the ice. I am much relieved to find you returned safe and sound. You must tell us your brave tale of how you managed to make your escape while we sup. I will have rooms prepared for you to stay with us tonight and arrangements will be made for you to return to Winterfell on the morrow”.

As they entered the dining hall, Jon touched Lord Manderly’s arm.

“A word, my lord?” he asked.

Manderly indicated that the others should proceed while he hung back to speak to Jon.

“What is it, son?” asked Manderly.

“The people crowding the docks”, replied Jon, “Val recognized some of them as wildlings who passed through the Wall with her”.

Manderly nodded in understanding.

“Aye…tis a sad sight to see”, he said. “The winds of winter have blown them south to our shores…refugees in the wake of the long, winter night to come”.

Manderly patted Jon on the back and gestured him to accompany him to the table.

“Come…I have another guest whom you should speak to”, he said. “Your sisters sent him to me with instructions to provide whatever men and supplies I can spare to help bolster our defenses further north. I believe you know him already…he was once a Black Brother, too. His name is Edd…Edd Tollett”.
Jon wrapped his arms around him and held him tight.

“I thought you might be dead”, cried Jon.

“If you squeeze me any tighter then I soon will be”, replied Edd with a wheeze and a feeble cough.

Jon loosened his grip and stood back, a silly grin plastered on his face. It was an undeniable relief to find his friend and former steward, if not hale and hearty, at least very much alive.

“What brings you to White Harbour?” asked Jon.

Then the realization dawned on him.

“The harbour”, he continued, “do you intend to join those poor souls gathered along the docks, desperate for passage away from these shores?”

Edd shook his head dolefully.

“Aye…tis tempting in light of what’s happened but my wife would soon hunt me down and drag me back to the Wall by what few hairs I have left on my head”, he replied.

Jon opened his mouth, unsure as to what to inquire about first…when did Edd acquire a wife and what has happened to drive him further south of the Wall?

Edd understood his look of bemusement, promptly launching into his story of how he was awakened before dawn in Long Barrow several moons past by an irate widowed spearwife pounding on his door. His efforts to have her lower her voice had the opposite reaction. She loudly insisted that she and her brood of four children be moved into larger quarters as they were currently crowded into a tiny room fit only for a small goat that would still have difficulty turning around. Then, before he could stop her, she barged into his room and looked around while nodding appreciatively.

“This will do nicely”, she declared, her hands braced on her hips.

By now a small crowd of other spearwives had gathered outside of his quarters and he realized to his chagrin that he was quite outnumbered as they murmured their approval of her expropriation. He began to gather some of his belongings, muttering that he would gladly swap rooms with her if it meant keeping the peace. But she grabbed his arm and stared at him steadily with her emerald green eyes.

“That won’t be necessary”, she said. “You’re welcome to stay here with us”.

And that, concluded Edd, was that. Within the blink of an eye he had acquired a sharp-tongued wife and brood of children who doted on him and ruled his life.

“She sent me south…along with the others”, he explained with a nod towards a group of men who stood awkwardly nearby, their outward appearance marking them as being outsiders.

“What has happened?” asked Jon, his forehead creased with concern.

But they were interrupted by the call that the feast was due to begin shortly and that they should assemble in the dining hall.
The doors to the hall were decorated with intricate carvings of crabs, starfish and octopods, half-hidden behind fronds of seaweed and sunken vessels. A statue of a bearded merman, painted white with dark green hair and tail, graced the entrance. The ceilings were draped with skeins of netting whilst beautiful tapestries depicting all manner of maritime life draped the walls from ceiling to floor.

Val stood just inside the entrance, off to one side, her eyes raking in all the details of the magnificent room. Jon touched her shoulder lightly, causing her to jump as if she had been taken unawares. She confessed that she had been thoroughly engrossed by the tapestries and the tales of underwater life that they told.

“Should I still address you as your grace?” asked Edd. “I’d bow but my back has be playing up with all the dampness in this city…although I might be able to muster up a nice curtsy if you insist”.

Val tilted her head to one side and shook it slowly while Jon barely suppressed a snigger.

“It’s Val…it has always been just Val”, she growled. “Don’t try taking the mick with me, Edd Tollett”.

While Val wandered over to the table to greet and converse with some members of the Free Folk, Jon probed Edd for more information.

“So why has your good wife send you south for an audience with Lord Manderly?” asked Jon.

Edd glanced furtively at his companions before leaning in closer to Jon.

“The Wall…it weeps and shudders, even on the coldest of nights”, he said. “So we’ve been fanning out across the north seeking help from the many houses. We need more men…more supplies…so we’re ready for that inevitable day”.

Jon paled.

“How much longer do you reckon?” asked Jon.

Edd stared at his hands briefly before raising his head.

“Soon enough…great slabs of ice have been sliding off the Wall”, he replied. “A few have been crushed to death already while many refuse to walk the top out of fear that it will collapse beneath their feet. And during the long nights…the…the Others gather in greater numbers north of the Wall…waiting patiently for the moment to strike”.

Jon opened his mouth to ask for more details when they were interrupted by one of Manderly’s stewards who bade them sit as the feast was about to begin.

Jon began to follow Edd to the table where his companions and Val sat chatting animatedly when the steward touched him on the shoulder.

“Lord Manderly instructed me to inform you that you are to sit at the table on the dais…near young Lord Stark”, he explained.

A glance at the head table revealed an uneasy looking Rickon dwarfed by the enormous chair he sat upon and the array of food that already adorned the tabletop. Osha stood behind him looking uncertain as to whether she should sit beside him or slink off to one of the tables reserved for the smallfolk. But it was apparent from the way Rickon clung to her hand that he was not prepared let her go.
The steward gestured Jon towards an empty chair near the end of the table. Jon took a step before whirling around.

“And where is my wife to sit?” he asked.

The steward looked confused.
“I…I’m sorry but his lordship made no mention of seating your wife”, he stammered.

Jon shook his head at Val who was now beckoning to him. Then he turned away from her briefly before gently pulling the steward towards him.

“Please have a place set for my wife next to me on the dais”, he said quietly.

The steward swallowed and nodded before scurrying away.

Jon stood by silently watching a bevy of servants hastily set another place at the head table. He felt Val sidle up to him and tug on his hand as the scrape of chairs and the sound of excited chatter filled the air.

“Come sit down”, she urged him. “There is much news to be shared”.

Jon shook his head.

“We will have to hear of their tales later”, he said as he guided her towards their seats at the head table.

Lord Manderly already sat next to Rickon in an oversized and overstuffed chair while Osha had been squeezed into a spot on the other side of the boy. Once everyone had been seated Manderly rose from his seat to speak.

“Honoured guests”, he boomed. “I am overjoyed that you are all here with me to celebrate this most auspicious occasion. The rightful heir to Winterfell has been returned to our shores and will soon take up his place as our liege lord so please join me in a toast”.

He raised a jewel encrusted goblet.

“To the wolves, ladies and sers…the Starks, the rulers of the north, are once again back where they belong”, he roared before taking a swig of wine.

The guests followed his lead, loudly clanking their goblets before downing their drink.

After setting his goblet down, Jon absently fiddled with the stem as his gaze roamed over the assembled guests. He watched them as they exchanged japes and quips, their raucous laughter rising to the rafters. They attacked their food, stabbing each morsel of food with their sharp knives and shoveling them between their lips. Jon began to feel slightly nauseated, pushing aside his plate as the noise swirled around him unabated.

Did they know about the frozen holocaust that awaited them should the Wall fall? Had they heeded the words of the black brothers and the Free Folk? Were they prepared to take up arms against the icy foe or were they taking steps to flee in their wake?

He felt Val’s fingers curl around his forearm and he turned to face her.

“You’re brooding”, she said.

He remained silent as she took his palm and stroked it with her thumb. Jon twisted in his seat to face
“Let’s get married…tonight”, he said suddenly.
Her eyes were more amused than exasperated at his request.
“We are married”, she said flatly.
Jon shook his head.
“Not in any way that is considered proper”, he replied.
She flared up immediately.
“My people’s ways ain’t good enough for you southron gentry, I suppose”, she retorted hotly, bright spots of red appearing on her cheeks.
He flushed and shook his head. He quickly searched for the words to soothe and placate her wounded pride that wouldn’t sound patronizing to her ears. He wondered how to explain to a woman who was more than capable of caring for herself that he wanted to ensure the protection of his family towards her throughout the dark days to come.
“I…I’m not asking for much”, he said, his words tripping over each other in their haste. “Just a few words said before the weirwood tree in the godswood…a simple affirmation before the old gods”.
Her eyes bore into his, trying to get to the heart of the matter. She was still suspicious of his motives, feeling slighted that this ceremony was merely an effort on his part to conform to southern mores. But as she examined his face more closely she detected the glints of fear peeking from his eyes.
“What’s he told you then?” she demanded with a jerk of her chin in Edd’s direction.
He closed his fingers around her hand and held it fast. He dropped his voice so that she could barely hear it above the din.
“Edd says the Wall is failing…it loses more mass every day”, he said. “And the Others gather in greater numbers, patiently waiting for the breach that will allow them to cross. Many of the Free Folk have already fled the north…we saw them ourselves, jostling amongst themselves on the docks in the harbour in their haste to leave these shores. Tomorrow we leave for Winterfell to return Rickon to his rightful place as its lord. My sister, Sansa, will be acting as his regent until he comes of age and she will require our support as the crisis deepens. No doubt she is already receiving refugees from the Wall looking to shelter behind Winterfell’s thick walls. And since I believe that Winterfell is where humanity either wins or fails in this battle for survival, I…I need to solidify our relationship once and for all so that I know my family will embrace you and accept you as one of their own as we face an uncertain future”.
She knew his words were heartfelt…Jon was hardly a glib man. She swallowed and stared bleakly at the merrymakers that surrounded them before nodding. In light of the doom that awaited all of them it was a tiny concession.

The sky at twilight was a painted in dark hues of blue and purple as Jon and Val set out on horses provided by Lord Manderly, Ghost galloping by their side. The godswood was an hour northwest of the Merman’s Court, just off the main road. As they drew further away, the lights of the city soon faded into the darkness and were replaced by glittering stars that spread themselves across the darkening sky and a three-quarter moon that peeked slyly over the horizon.
They slowed their horses from a canter into a trot as they turned into the woods that lined the road. Puffs of steam billowed out of the horses’ mouths and their riders could feel the frost that hung in the air, stinging their faces and penetrating their clothes. The leaves on the trees rustled as if shivering with cold while the riders and the wolves marched past, trampling the undergrowth until they reached a clearing where a solitary tree stood, its bone-white branches bathed in moonlight.

While Jon hobbled the horses, Val touched the tree, running her fingers over the outline of the face crudely carved into its trunk. The blood red sap still wept, staining her fingers. She reached up to brush her fingertips over one of the leaves that stubbornly clung to the gnarled branches. The tree defied the changing weather, remaining vigilant while all the other trees slowly drifted off to sleep.

“So...you shall bear witness to our vows”, she whispered.

A pair of owls hooted to each other as Jon joined her and placed a hand in hers. As a cold breeze swirled around the tree, causing the leaves to shake furiously, they pledged themselves to each other for all eternity. Then Jon shrugged off his cloak and tenderly placed it around Val’s shoulders. She pulled the collar up around her neck as a defense against the biting cold and took a deep breath. The cloak smelled of sweat, wood smoke and Jon.

“May I keep it?” she asked as she brushed her fingertips against the soft fur. “I don’t think I have ever worn anything so fine”.

Jon smiled as he pulled her against his chest and leaned down to kiss her near the nape of her neck, the spot that never failed to make her giggle and squirm.

“Oh course”, he replied, his hot breath tickling her ear. “It is a symbol of my pledge to love and protect you always”.

She pushed at him lightly and then grinned as she pulled the cloak tighter.

When they returned to the Merman’s Court, Lord Manderly was circulating amongst the remaining guests. Many were still sharing mugs of ale and making boastful claims of deeds long past while a few were already staggering towards the doors, leaning heavily on a companion or a long-suffering servant, repeatedly shouting their goodnights. Manderly directed some of the guards to wake those who had fallen asleep in their cups and escort them to their rooms while the servants scurried about collecting dishes and tossing the remnants of the feast to the dogs that followed hot on their heels.

Ghost stared down one skinny cur before wolfing down the remains of some roasted fowl that had fallen to the floor while Jon and Val crossed the room to greet Manderly. He offered his hearty congratulations to the both of them and had one of the servants bring up the best Dornish wine that he stocked in his cellar.

“Honoured guests”, said Manderly clapping his hands together. He threw his arms around Jon and Val’s shoulders before pulling them closer to his side. “I’m pleased to report that young Jon Snow here has taken a bride this evening so I hope you will join us shortly in sharing a toast to their future happiness”.

The remaining guests cheered loudly and thumped their tables, although Val wondered if their happy response wasn’t simply due to the anticipation of enjoying some of Manderly’s better selection of wine.

She felt parched as a result of the long ride and decided that a cup of ale would do for now. She spied a jug on a table nearby and made her excuses to go pour herself a cup. As she passed by one of the guests, a grizzled old veteran with spittle dripping from a corner of his mouth, he reached out and
grabbed the hem of her newly acquired cloak.

“Very nice, lass…very nice”, he slurred as he staggered to his feet and reached for the clasp at her neck. She slapped at his hand when she realized that he intended to remove her prized cloak and looked at him warily. He beckoned to two of his companions who rose up to join him while she glanced over at Jon who was still deep in conversation with Manderly.

“C’mon lads”, said the guest to the others, “one of you grab her feet while the other take hold of her arms and I’ll have her out of these clothes in two shakes of a lamb’s tale, you’ll see”.

But before the others could lay a hand on her Val grabbed the man and held her knife against his throat.

“Touch me and he dies”, she snarled at the other two.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see two guards hurrying towards her with swords drawn. She delivered a swift kick to the man’s shin and shoved him so hard that he stumbled and fell against his companions, throwing them all off balance, while she desperately searched for an escape. She could hear the roaring in her ears when she felt a pair of strong arms wrap themselves around her shoulders.

“Easy, love”, whispered Jon.

She panted lightly as the adrenaline continued to course through her veins. The guards had already slunk back to their posts and the three drunken guests, still entangled, regarded her with a mixture of bewilderment and fear.

“Gentle sers”, said Jon,” my wife is new to these parts and is unfamiliar with the bedding ritual. Besides, that ship has already sailed…if you catch my drift”.

Val twisted around to see the silly smirk on Jon’s face. The men who attempted to grab her looked at each other nervously before their titters dissolved into loud guffaws. Then, one by one, they slapped Jon on the back and winked at Val before settling back down at their table and loudly calling for more ale.

“What the fuck is a bedding ritual?” she exclaimed with outrage as he hustled her from the hall.

Jon squeezed her tightly as they walked swiftly down the corridor towards their rooms for the night. In a few short sentences he explained the custom of having the wedding guests carry off the bride and groom to their bedchamber, disrobing them in the process, and then remaining just outside the doors making ribald japes while the couple consummated their marriage.

Val wrinkled her nose in disgust as they paused just outside the door to their chamber. Then she glanced down the corridor in both directions as Jon pushed the door open.

“There better not be anybody standing outside our door tonight playing with hisself”, she yelled, her voice echoing down the corridor, before entering the room.

They were pleased to discover a warm fire burning low in the fireplace and a hot steaming bath. Val closed her eyes as she dipped her fingers in the lavender scented water before bending down to pull off her boots. Jon stood before the fire, poking the logs until it roared, the flames licking at the flue. He turned around when he heard the swish of the water and watched Val sink into the depths of the enormous copper tub.
“Join me”, she entreated him, gesturing languidly. “There’s room enough for the two”.

As Jon peeled off his clothes before climbing into the tub, he recalled fondly the last time he had shared a bath. He and Robb would splash happily and scrub each other’s back. Then they would battle, loudly ramming together small chunks of soap that served as tiny sailing ships until a servant was forced to intervene, declaring a truce before being escorting them off to bed.

Val slid on to Jon’s lap as soon as he settled himself and laid her head against his chest with a contented sigh. The water lapped gently against her breasts as Jon brushed his fingertips across her nipples, eliciting a small moan of pleasure from her lips.

“Keep going”, she whispered as his fingers slid lower.

As the water began to cool they clambered out the tub, dried themselves off and moved to the bed. Their pleasure was unhurried as they explored each other’s body with practiced fingers, leaving trails of soft, pillowy kisses over every inch of exposed skin. Finally, when Val climbed on top of Jon and he slid inside her, they rocked back and forth in rhythm, their hands grasped together tightly until he heard her cry out and shudder. Then, and only then, did he let go, finding his own release with a groan as he spent his seed inside of her.

As the fatigue of the day overtook them, they burrowed beneath the furs and fit themselves together with a familiarity borne out of countless nights already spent together.

When Jon awoke, he could smell the pungent, spicy scent of the tea that she sipped most mornings, made from the dried leaves and flowers of the tansy plant that she carried in a small leather pouch fastened to the belt around her waist. Jon was well aware of the tea’s purpose as Ygritte had also made it a habit of drinking the tea as they huddled before the fire in the semi-darkness before breaking camp in the mornings.

Jon was reluctant at first to draw attention to the issue but decided that in light of last night, it was time.

“Val”, he said as he watched her take another sip of tea, “have you ever considered bearing children?”

She looked a little startled at first. Then she laid aside her mug and turned to face him.

“No…not with Jarl”, she said hesitantly. “We were constantly on the move with our only purpose being finding safety south of your wall. A child would have been a burden and…and it was enough that Dalla was already pregnant and needed me”.

Her eyes misted with tears and she brushed them away impatiently with the heel of her palm. Then she reached out to touch his face and managed a small, sad smile.

“One day, Jon Snow, I will bear your child”, she said softly as she stroked his cheek, “but I don’t wish to conceive today…nor tomorrow. So, unless the gods take that choice away from me, I will continue to brew my tansy tea until we both decide we’re ready”.

They lingered in bed far longer than they had planned, their reverie interrupted by the sound of small fists pounding on their door and a small, high voice demanding entrance. They both hastily rose and threw on clothing before Jon wrenched open the door. Rickon pushed his way in, Shaggydog hot on his heels, and then threw himself on to the still warm bed. Then he scrambled to his feet and began to jump sending up puffs of feathers that escaped from the ticking.

“He’s very excited about returning home”, said Osha as she hung back in the door frame, an
apologetic look on her face.

Jon strode over to the bed, wrestled his little brother off the bed and wrapped the squirming child in a bear hug, holding him fast while burying his face in the boy’s hair.

“It pleases me that you’re so happy”, whispered Jon, his voice muffled, before releasing the boy. Rickon flashed him a mischievous grin before chasing Shaggydog out the door.

“He’s recalling little snippets of memory now”, reported Osha, still lingering near the door. “Happier memories now, I expect. He’s been chattering away about seeing his sister again”.

Jon suspected that many of these memories were wrapped up with Shaggydog’s who had been behaving in a similarly agitated manner, eagerly anticipating his reunion with his sister, Nymeria. Ghost had been behaving a bit more aggressively as of late, sensing his sister’s proximity once again.

They packed up their belongings after breakfast and bid a fond farewell to Edd, his companions and Lord Manderly before setting off north, accompanied by a guard of over five hundred men and wagons of supplies provided by the Merman’s court. The guards, said Manderly, would continue on to the Wall as an extra layer of defense. He promised another two thousand men, in response to Edd’s pleas, to follow as soon as he could muster together the supplies necessary to sustain them, with a thousand to remain at Winterfell as a fallback measure.

“I also need to continue to garrison a large number of men in White Harbour”, he continued. “The situation grows more dire by the day with the desperation to leave these shores sinking deeper and spreading wider”.

“I understand”, said Jon with a nod.

Then they clapped shoulders and shook hands vigorously, each bleakly aware of the frigid threat sweeping down from the north that could render all their efforts moot.
Chapter 14

Snow. Her people had many words for snow…from the hard, crusty snow that could support her weight when she was a child, sliding giddily across its glittering surface, to the soft, pillowy snow that piled up against their huts during the long nights, blanketing the world in a luminous silence. In the spring, they would watch in awe as the snow tumbled and slid down from the mountain tops to feed the rivers and lakes below. And in the fall, when the first wet snowflakes fell, she and the other children of her village would scoop them up just as they hit the ground and pack them into perfectly round orbs to lob at their unsuspecting neighbours as they ventured outside to start their day.

But this kind of snow was the one that only instilled fear. The fierce northwest winds howled and whipped the snow pellets into a frenzy, driving them sideways, stinging her cheeks until they felt numb. Visibility was growing poorer by the minute as the snowfall intensified until she could barely see Jon plodding just ahead of her.

“We’re becoming snowblind”, she muttered. “If we continue any further we’ll stray too far from the road”.

The snow was drifting, making it increasingly difficult for the horses to pick their way through its depths. She called out to Jon but the wind carried off her words before they could reach his ears so she nudged her little garron a little closer, feeling it stumble before recovering its footing. Then she took a deep breath.

“Jon”, she shouted, her vocal chords straining, “we need to stop now and find shelter before all is lost”.

She could read the stubborn set of his shoulders and thought to herself that Jon was possibly more mulish than Tormund…and that was no mean feat. But within a few seconds she could see those same shoulders slump slightly before he raised his right arm, signaling a halt. A young soldier urged his horse forward and leaned in to hear Jon’s words. Then he nodded before turning around to pass the word down the line. It was a small victory for Val but a hollow one.

Jon slowly dismounted and stood still for a minute. He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. Then he raised his arm again and pointed into a swirl of snow where the faint outline of trees could be seen.

“I can smell smoke from that direction”, he cried as he remounted his horse and motioned for the others to follow. “I’m hoping we’ll find a town or village…or at least a farmer who can provide shelter or at least space to pitch our tents until the storm has passed”.

Val pulled her scarf up over her mouth and pulled her hood down before digging her heels into her horse’s sides. The direwolves galloped on ahead sending up sprays of snow, heedless of the extreme weather.

The trees provided some respite from the powerful winds. They found a path which had been cleared of trees and undergrowth and followed it until they reached what appeared to be a small village encased in white.

They knocked on a couple of doors but nobody replied. The third door opened a crack, revealing a young man with lank, dark hair that grew low on his forehead, outwardly slanting eyes and a flat, wide face. He regarded them silently, guardedly while Jon explained their situation.
“Who’s there, Joss?” interrupted a high, quavering voice from the recesses of the small cottage.

“Travellers, Gran”, he replied, his words thick and slurred, his tongue resting on his lower lip as if it was too big to be contained. “They’ve come off the main road, seeking shelter from the storm”.

“Then for goodness’ sake let them in”, she replied.

Joss pulled the door open bit wider, enough to let them squeeze past while using it as a shield against winter’s blast.

Joss shrugged and gestured towards the faint shadows of the other buildings that lined the edges of the cottage.

“Tell them to take their pick”, he replied, “there’s many a shelter to choose from”.

As the others entered, brushing the snow from their shoulders and stamping their feet to loosen the snow from their boots, Jon remained outside to issue instructions to his men. Joss loomed over him, waiting impassively until Ghost padded into view. Then he suddenly grabbed Jon’s shoulder.

“Is…is that yours?” he asked excitedly, pointing to the direwolf. Then he gasped when he saw a flash of black moving swiftly past the men as they scattered in search of shelter. Shaggydog was leaping through the heavy snow to rejoin his brother.

Jon gently disengaged the man’s hand before nodding and reassuring him that the wolves were no danger to him unless he became a threat. Joss stood transfixed as he watched Ghost and Shaggydog heading towards the trees before disappearing behind a wall of snow. Jon tugged on Joss’ sleeve impatiently, indicating that they should take shelter in the cottage before they both froze to death. Joss stammered in agreement and kicked savagely at the snow that had drifted against the door before yanking it open. He quickly followed Jon, slamming the door shut behind him and leaning heavily, beaming like a child who has unexpectedly received a sweet.

“There’s a wolf, Gran”, he yelled, “with fur as white as the snow and eyes as red as the leaves on the heart tree…just like in her story”.

A small, elderly woman with sunken eyes and hollowed cheeks, tottered towards the door, motioning to Jon to join the others by the small fire that crackled cheerfully on the grate in the fireplace.

“There’s no need to raise your voice, dear”, she declared briskly. “I may be half-blind but I’m not deaf.”

“I’m going to fetch her”, said Joss as he grabbed his coat.

The woman, who had been passing out threadbare blankets as an extra layer of warmth against the cold, gently admonished him to put his coat away.

“Not now…she’ll not want to come out in such weather”, she said. “You can go for her once the storm has passed. Now fetch some food and drink for our guests”.

Joss was about to hang up his coat on the rusted nail when Jon placed a hand on his arm and shook his head.

“We have our own provisions”, he explained. “Although I could use some help carrying them in”.

After Jon and Joss had ventured out again into the storm to fetch some supplies from the wagons,
Val turned to the woman.

“Is this some girl he’s sweet on, then?” asked Val as she lowered herself to the floor and wrapped a thin blanket around her shoulders.

The woman sat back in her ancient rocking chair with a sigh and clasped her hands in her lap.

“Aye…she’s a nice young thing…Joss befriended her a couple of moons ago. She’s a patient little thing…been teaching him his letters, she has”, she replied.

Then she shook her head and clucked her tongue while Val looked lost in thought.

“It’s been a bit of an uphill battle”, Gran added as she glanced at the door. “Joss is a slow learner. But once he’s latched on to something he treasures then he rarely lets go”.

Almost on cue, the door blew open to admit Jon and Joss who carried a wheel of cheese, some dried sausages and berries, a few loaves of bread and two jugs of ale.

“A feast fit for a king, eh Gran?” beamed Joss as they laid out the food and drink on the small, scarred table.

While Jon and Val produced knives to slice up the meat, cheese and bread, Osha poured out cups of ale.

“My men report there is no shortage of abandoned homes in the village”, reported Jon.

“Aye”, replied Gran, “there are very few of us left. First the war starting driving people away. Then, when word reached our ears that the Wall was crumbling and that the Others had been sighted, waiting to cross, we didn’t believe it at first. The Wall has stood like a sentinel for thousands of years…how could such a massive structure ever fall? We had all heard the stories of the terror of the Others at our mother’s knee but they had always been just that…stories. But as more and travellers passed through with the same tale upon their lips then we knew there must be some truth to those stories. So gradually everyone else began to pack up all their belongings and joined the mass exodus flowing along the road until all that were left were those too sick, too old or too stubborn to move”.

The storm continued to rage all around them with the wind pounding on the door and moaning through the small chinks in the wooden walls. After the dishes had been cleaned in melted snow, Gran’s offer to have them stay the night was graciously accepted. While Jon slipped out to inform the men, Val and Osha laid out bedding on the floor near the fire. Gran dozed in her chair while Joss sat at the table whittling a piece a wood, nodding as he listened to Rickon chatter away in a mixture of the Old and Common Tongues.

Jon and Val slept fitfully that night. At one point, Val woke up with a start to discover Jon already fully awake. He stood by the tiny window, his face illuminated by the moon which sent its shimmering beams over the freshly fallen snow.

“It has finally stopped snowing”, he whispered. “We’ll set out just after first light”.

She nodded, yawned and patted the furs.

“Come back to bed”, she whispered. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us”.

She watched him tiptoe across the rickety floorboards and waited until he settled once more to broach the subject she had been ruminating over for a time.
“I want to learn how to read,” she said without preamble.

She could feel him stiffen slightly before he took another breath.

“It never occurred to me that you couldn’t already”, he said. “Well… I suppose I could engage services of a maester to teach you once we reach Winterfell. Rickon is going need to learn as well so you could do it together”.

Val scowled.

“I would prefer if you could be my teacher”, she growled.

She knew she was prideful enough to want to keep this a secret between them. She was acutely aware that a small part of her craved acceptance and that this same small part feared that the Stark family would look down upon Jon’s choice of a wife, believing that despite his bastard status he had clearly married beneath him.

He made a face.

“I don’t think I would be very good at it”, he replied with a slight shake of his head.

“You’d be plenty good at it”, she said with a sigh. “You’ve loads more patience than me”.

We’ll see, he said as he sealed the conversation closed with a tender kiss to her forehead. She wrestled with idea of pursuing it further but Jon had already slid beneath the furs and closed his eyes. She nestled closer into the crook of his body and drew his arm around her, allowing the issue to rest for now and to let the rise and fall of his chest lull her back to sleep.

The smell of bacon sizzling in a heavy pan over the open flame prodded them both awake. As they rubbed the sleep from their eyes, Gran chirpily announced that porridge sweetened with honey and sprinkled with dried elderberries already on the table accompanied by warm cream that she had just skimmed off the top of the fresh milk.

After breakfast, Jon sent word to the men to get ready to leave. As he fumbled with the straps of his saddle, he could hear the men calling to each other as they prepared their horses and loaded up the wagons. A strong westerly wind was blowing, chasing away the remnants of the dark clouds that had brought the driving snows while the sun peeked out from behind them as they raced past. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ghost padding silently out from the bush, followed closely by his brother who galloped past him towards the woodshed where peals of laughter intermingled with the crack of an axe could be heard. Val and Osha were showing Rickon how to replenish Gran’s woodpile but judging by Rickon’s loud grunts and colourful cursing it was garnering hit and miss results.

Jon’s horse nickered and shuffled nervously as Ghost broke and burrowed into a nearby bank of snow sculpted by the wind into ripples and waves, until he almost seamlessly blended into the freshly fallen snow. As he rested his large head on his front paws, he kept a watchful eye while his ears twitched, alert to any disturbance. Jon noted that Ghost’s snout was smeared with blood and hoped against hope that the direwolves had not broken into Joss’ small pen where he had been breeding rabbits.

He didn’t hear them at first. As a flock of starlings took off, their chattering calls filled the air. But as soon as the birds trailed off beyond the treetops, Jon heard the high pitched voice of a young girl speaking to a man whose words poured out of his mouth as thick as molasses.

“See…see…I told you”, shouted Joss as he gestured towards Ghost. The direwolf slowly rose up
and shook the snow off his back before fixing his eyes on the newcomers.

The girl giggled and tugged on his arm to stop.

“I believed you…truly I did”, she said.

Her voice was muffled due to the long grey scarf that was wound around her face so that the only features that remained to the casual onlooker were a pair of blue eyes and wisps of black hair that had escaped her hood and were floating in the breeze.

In an instant Jon realized that he knew those eyes.

She froze when she caught sight of him, reminding him of a skittish fawn. Then she slowly tugged down on the scarf, far enough to reveal pink lips and grey, scaly scars on her left cheek.

“I saw you die”, she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Joss’ brow was furrowed in confusion as he stared at her while Jon remained still and silent, uncertain how to respond.

“I saw you shake and shudder, your face contorted in agony as the flames ate away at you”, she continued, her voice filling with emotion. “Your…your screams haunted my dreams for weeks to come. And yet, here you are...as large as life itself”.

She took a few steps forward until she stood within an arm’s length of Jon. Then she reached out with hesitant fingers to lay a hand upon his chest, just over his rapidly beating heart. He laid his larger hand over hers and held it fast.

“I’m sorry you were forced to witness such horror”, said Jon softly. “The red priestess…she couldn’t disobey your mother but she was compelled to keep me alive for reasons known only to herself”.

Her eyes were sorrowful as she nodded in understanding.

“Yours wasn’t the first”, she said. “I saw many of my father’s former loyalists given to the flames for refusing to accept her red god. But I was always careful to keep my tears locked inside until I was free to weep into my pillow when I was alone at night”.

Joss had moved closer and wrapped a heavy arm around her narrow shoulders.

“Don’t be sad, Shireen”, he said, his voice full of concern. “When you’re sad, I’m sad”.

Shireen reached up to pat his hand.

“I’m not sad anymore, Joss”, she replied. “I’m happy the Lord Commander is alive…and I’m happy to be here with you”.

The crease between Joss’ brows disappeared as relief flooded his broad face.

Jon turned when he heard the voices behind him grow louder and then stop abruptly. While Osha and Rickon regarded the girl with open curiosity, Val looked surprised and then wary at the sight of the Baratheon princess. An awkward silence ensued which was broken by Joss who was eager to make introductions.

“This is my friend, Shireen”, he said proudly.

Val stood by sullenly with folded arms, Osha standing silently by her shoulder, while Rickon,
innocent of the girl’s affliction, shyly offered his hand to her.

“Rickon…don’t!” hissed Osha as she grabbed his hand. “The girl is unclean”.

Joss stepped between them and Shireen, his face reddening in anger, balling his fists.

“Shireen is not unclean”, he retorted hotly.

“The girl is no danger to anyone and you’re a fool if you believe otherwise”, said a stentorious voice.

The woman was, as always, a symphony in scarlet with a thin shawl wrapped around her shoulders being her only concession to the freezing temperatures. She had rounded the little cottage unawares and now stood serenely near its entrance, her penetrating red eyes coolly assessing the scene before her.

“Lady Melisandre”, exclaimed Jon, “this is a most unexpected meeting”.

Melisandre gathered up her skirts and carefully picked her way through the drifts of snow to join the small gathering.

“Unclench your fists, Joss”, she said sharply. “The girl does not require you to be her champion at this moment”.

She nodded briefly at Val before turning to Jon.

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival, Jon Snow”, she said as she held out her hand to him. “We would have come by last night but the weather was most uncooperative”.

Jon drew back slightly, a faint look of amusement on his face.

“Did your lord of light whip up that snowstorm all by himself to drive us off the road and into this mostly deserted place just so we could meet again?” he asked.

Then he held up a conciliatory hand and muttered a “nevermind” when he saw the look of irritation flit across her face.

”It is time”, she said briskly. “Suffice it to say, my lord god has seen fit to guide us back to you. Shireen and I will join you anon on your trek back to Winterfell. I trust you have extra horses…otherwise we can travel in one of the wagons”.

Shireen’s face crumpled upon hearing Melisandre’s announcement. She grabbed Joss’ hand.

“But I don’t want to go”, she cried out piteously.

Melisandre snorted and raised a hand.

“Silence, child!” she hissed, her red eyes blazing. “Have you forgotten who you are?”

In the blink of an eye, Jon saw Melisandre’s hand move but he reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could land a blow.

“My lady”, he said softly but firmly, “methinks it is you who forgets herself”.

When Stannis was alive the extent of the closeness of his relationship with the red priestess was unclear. She clearly enjoyed his protection, always flanked by his Baratheon guards, as one of his closest advisers and she held sway over Queen Selyse. But she was never their equal…and, in Jon’s
estimation, she had no right to strike the heir to the Stormlands.

He was acutely aware of the several pairs of eyes that were watching the drama unfolding before them. Val stood still with arms folded, trying to maintain some kind of emotional distance from the situation. Osha pulled Rickon away, urging him to come with her as they joined the throng of soldiers that were filing past, though some had paused to watch the scene of out of idle curiosity, as they trudged towards the road.

Shireen was sobbing quietly, clinging to Joss as he vainly tried to comfort her. Jon glanced at the door to the cottage when he heard it creak open.

“Go on, child”, said Gran gently. “It’s time to return to your people. There’s no future for you here”.

Melisandre had wrenched her hand free of Jon’s grasp and regained some of her composure. She gathered up her skirts and, after a brief nod at Gran, turned her attention back to Jon.

“I’ll gather up our things and join all of you anon”, she said calmly. She set her eyes once more on Shireen, reaching out to cup the girl’s tear stained face. “Don’t tarry in making your farewells …you know it only makes it harder to leave”.

Shireen gulped and nodded meekly in return.

After Melisandre had departed, Val strode over to her horse and mounted it with a grunt.

“Come…or don’t come…just don’t be long”, she said indifferently as she took up the reins. “It’s cold out here and the men will be getting restless”.

Her blunt words were spoken to Jon but it was clear her remarks were directed more to Shireen. Then she dug her heels into the horse’s side and rode away without a backward glance.

Meanwhile, Gran was offering words of comfort to Shireen.

“There, there, child”, she said soothingly. “Now dry away your tears and give us a hug and a kiss for luck”.

Shireen wrapped her arms around the older woman’s waist and held her tight. Then she abruptly pulled away.

“Come away with us”, she blurted out.

Then she turned to Jon, desperately looking for confirmation. Jon shrugged and nodded in silent reply. In the grand scheme of things, two more companions on the road meant almost nothing.

But Gran shook her head.

“This is my home, sweetling…the only one I’ve ever known”, she replied. “And I’m too old and ornery to go anywhere else. But I can’t speak for Joss…”

Joss looked torn as he looked at Shireen’s stricken yet hopeful face. Yet, after a few seconds of contemplation, he, too, shook his head.

“I can’t leave Gran all alone”, he said sadly. “I have to stay and look after her…she’s the only family I have left”.

Shireen twisted her fingers and looked downcast.
“Well…that’s it then”, she whispered. “It’s time to say goodbye once more”.

They set out on a day filled with promise. Melisandre sat astride a roan mare, a spirited animal that moved restlessly beneath the woman’s seat. Jon lifted Shireen on to the back of the smallest pony they had left, one only slightly bigger than Rickon’s.

“Is Lady Val your wife now?” asked Shireen as Jon tightened the straps on the saddle.

“She is”, he replied with a wry smile. “But she’ll not take too kindly to you calling her Lady Val”.

Shireen stroked the pony’s neck and patted his head.

“Do you think she hates me?” she asked, her eyes trained on the back of Val’s head.

Jon shook his head.

“She barely knows you so how could she possibly hate you,” he replied.

Shireen’s raised her gloved hand and brushed her fingers against the scars on her face.

“Then she fears me”, she said softly. “She wouldn’t be the first”.

Nor the last I'll wager, thought Jon.

Rickon sidled up beside Shireen and reached over to offer his ungloved hand.

“I’m Rickon Stark of Winterfell and I’m very pleased to meet you, Princess Shireen”, he said in a halting voice.

Then he grinned impishly at Jon, happy to demonstrate both his good manners and his increasingly better command of the common tongue. Jon smiled approvingly in return.

After mounting his horse and giving the signal to move forward, Jon leaned over to speak to Val.

“It’s not like you to be so cold…especially to a child”, he admonished her.

She glanced at him, her mouth hard set.

“Have you ever witnessed what that disease can do to a person?” she asked. “Because I have. I have seen people forced out of their homes…sent out into the wilderness to die alone. The disease is slow and merciless, eventually robbing you of all your humanity… unless the elements take you first. It would have been kinder to have your maesters kill her…a nice, clean death is always preferable. Instead they have condemned her to a cruel fate because mark my words…when the grayscale finally wakes up, she’ll wish she’d never been born”.

“How can you be so sure?” asked Jon.

Her lower lip began to tremble as she stared straight ahead. Then he noticed her left hand letting go of the reins, allowing it to rest against her belly.

“I know…” she whispered hoarsely. “Trust me…I know”.

There was a shift in her demeanor as she turned back to him.

“And if you value the life of your unborn child, Jon Snow, you’ll keep that child away from me”, she snapped.
Chapter 15

The swaying and jerking motion of the wagon was doing little to ease her roiling belly. Val could feel the bile rising in her throat, so quickly that she barely had time to turn her head to retch over the side, leaving a brownish trail of half digested venison stew in the snow. As she gripped the rail tightly, she drew the back of her hand to wipe the spittle from her mouth before closing her eyes to wait for the swirling feeling to pass. She opened her eyes and straightened up when she felt the gentle shake of her arm.

“Sure you wouldn’t like a taste?” asked the driver, a grizzled veteran of many campaigns. He shook a metal flask at her, the liquid inside sloshing audibly. “My missus was partial to the tipple when she was carryin’ our young’uns. She swore by it…said it settled her belly right down”.

Val shook her head silently. He only meant to be kind but she knew that the drink he was offering was apt to stoke the fire in her belly instead of dowsing it.

She stared dully at the unchanging scene passing by. The barren deciduous trees that lined the road creaked and moaned while the conifers, the only spot of colour to break up the monotony of seemingly endless grey and white, shook the snow from their leafy fronds as the wind whistled past. She saw very few signs of life as the column moved slowly along the road north, with most of the animals having gone to ground or fled. Or dead, she thought glumly.

She wondered if her current sorry state could be considered a sin of omission or commission. Truth be told she really didn’t understand the difference, having heard the words for the first time as they pushed their way through the crowds of anxious people who lined the docks in White Harbour. The words came from the lips of a man who stood on a packing crate as he addressed the crowd that stopped to listen to him. An itinerant preacher, said Jon in response to her enquiry, a devout follower of the Seven. The man was neither young nor old but he was painfully thin and wrapped in soiled sackcloth that was held together with a frayed leather belt. He gesticulated wildly as he exhorted the crowd to repent their sins and reaffirm their faith in the Seven.

“They are coming for us because we have failed to remain true”, he cried. “We have lost sight of our gods…we forget our oaths…we steal, we kill and we fornicate without thought of consequence. And now we are reaping our just rewards. The gods are angry with us and they are sending their wrath in the form of an icy scourge that masses just north of the Wall. And the Wall, which should have stood strong for all eternity, now trembles in their sight. If we do nothing then it will fall and all will be lost. The Others will storm across the countryside eking out the gods’ justice and none shall be spared. So pray with me, brothers and sisters all…pray with me now. Fall on your knees and join me in offering our most humble obedience to the Seven who watch over us. Confess your sins and renounce all that is unholy in this world that the gods have all but forsaken. Then, and only then, can we hope that they will hear our prayers and save us from an eternity in their army of the undead”.

She shuddered and sighed deeply as she recalled the preacher’s words, earning her a concerned glance from the driver. When she remained silent, her eyes fixed on the flanks of the horses as they strained to pull the wagon through the deepening snow, he shrugged his shoulders and took another swig of grain alcohol from his flask.

Osha rode into view.

“You’re looking a bit peaky”, she commented. “Is that the remains of your midday meal the horses are trampling over? Maybe you should consider stretching out back with the turnips and the potatoes…get in a bit of kip”.

Val shook her head.

“Naw…I’m good here for now…maybe later,” she replied.

Osha twisted her head closer to Val’s.

“You should’ve told me”, said Osha. “You should’ve told me you were running low”.

Val swerved to meet her gaze.

“And you would’ve done what exactly?” she snapped. “Would you have gone to that fish-eyed maester and begged him for more for me? He would’ve looked at you like he looked at me… like you was something he’d found on the bottom of his shoe…so…no, that was a non-starter as far as I was concerned”.

She had visibly flinched when she felt the maester’s hand drop on to her shoulder to give her a swift pat. It was a patronizing gesture, followed by a stern lecture as to whether this constituted a violation of the marriage pact for surely it was unseemly that she, as a married woman, should be seeking such means to forestall a pregnancy. Then he asked her if she had Jon’s permission to make such a request. Val gaped dumfounded at him for a minute before mumbling a half-hearted thank you for his time. Then she turned heel and fled his chambers.

There were no opportunities to scour the unknown alleys of White Harbour for the services of a herbalist or even an abortionist as it was time to leave the city. And seeking the services of a woods witch had proved to be fruitless. Their stores had been long depleted and they no longer had the means to replenish them. The tansy flowers that had once bloomed in the meadows now lay buried beneath the snows that blanketed the surrounding countryside, slain by the first of the killing frosts.

She knew she could have denied him and sent him off to sleep with his wolf. Or told him to pull out…or told him to use only his fingers and tongue. That would have been the logical response to her predicament. But she remained mum. And the emotions that churned inside of her as she ruminated over what to do were still as real and intense now as they were then.

Osha shook her head ruefully and clucked her tongue.

“Tis not the right time to be bringing a child into the world”, she said mournfully.

Val leaned forward, her forearms resting on her thighs.

“Aye”, replied Val, “but when will there ever be a right time?”

For all her sins, Val had no regrets about her decision. She dwelt on the moment when she revealed her secret to Jon that she was with child. It was a moment of absolute closeness, the fullness of which still sent a chill down her spine. She remembered the way his fingers grazed her breasts seconds before finally resting his palm flat on her belly as the words stumbled from her mouth. The steadiness of his hand grounded her when all she wanted to do was soar as he whispered how much he would always love and cherish her for choosing to make this tiny life with him.

Osha leaned forward in her saddle, craning her neck to peer off into the distance. Then she pulled up straight and shook her head.

“He’s riding with her again”, she muttered.

“She means him no harm,” replied Val absently.
Osha gave her a sharp look.

“She is still a stone girl. And for all I know the sickness is due to come back… and once that happens she’ll be able to doom us all with a simple touch,” she hissed.

Val shrugged her shoulders. She had heard this refrain repeatedly since the two lonely children had sparked up their friendship. Once Val had made her views abundantly clear to all and sundry, Shireen had taken great pains to keep her distance from her. To her relief, after a few days they had managed to develop a cool but not hostile relationship. But on the other hand, Shireen’s increasing closeness with Rickon was causing nothing but grief for Osha as she fretted about the amount of time her precious little lord was spending in the company of the scarred child.

Val sighed.

“Then you’d best go remind him”, she said.

She almost laughed out loud as she watched Osha spur her horse into a slow trot, picking its way through the deep snow. She knew Osha was slowly losing her influence over the boy as they drew ever closer to Winterfell.

And once they had returned, Rickon’s tutelage would be taken up by his sister, Sansa and Osha’s place in his life would be reduced to little more than a beloved childhood nanny.

She had been dozing lightly when the wagon creaked to a halt.

“Why have we stopped?” she asked the driver as her eyes searched the sparse, desperate terrain that surrounded them but nothing appeared to be amiss. The men chatted boisterously while the horses twitched and shuffled restlessly. Then she could see Jon and another rider making their way down the side of the column of men and horses, his thick dark hair ruffled by the wind and a grin splitting his normally guarded face. It took her a beat longer to recognize his companion.

“Satin”, she cried, holding out her arms.

She almost wept as she clung to him, a sign now that they were so close to completing this long journey and finally being reunited with family and friends.

“When word reached us that you were within a day’s ride of Winterfell I knew I couldn’t wait until you’d reached the gates so I’ve come to welcome you back”, said Satin.

When she released him he frowned slightly.

“Why aren’t you riding up front with Jon?” he asked.

She reddened and glanced at Jon before replying.

“I fell off my horse a few days ago”, she replied.

Satin looked concerned.

“Were you hurt?” he asked. “Shall I fetch the maester for you?”

She shook her head.

“I’m fine…really”, she replied with a light laugh. “The snow is soft and deep. Besides, it wasn’t so much a tumble…it was more like I slid to the ground”.

Satin still looked puzzled while Jon cleared his throat.
“I haven’t had time to tell him of your news yet”, said Jon, giving her a pointed look.

Satin tilted his chin down and cocked his head to one side in expectation of further details.

He whooped with delight when she told him she was with child, how the consequent dizzy spells had caught her unaware and caused her to be relegated her to the back of the train aboard the vegetable wagon.

“It’s just a precaution for now”, she explained. “I expect they’ll pass as I get further along”.

They set up camp just as the sun began to slowly begin its descent. The atmosphere was more jovial as everyone was keenly aware how close they were to ending this seemingly interminable march north. Jon ordered extra rations of beer be distributed amongst the troops and they sang songs long into the night as they clustered around the dozens of campfires that dotted the gloomy landscape.

Satin offered to bunk in one of the crowded tents until Jon insisted that he join him and Val in their more spacious accommodation.

“It’ll be just like old times”, said Jon with a wink.

They swapped stories for a couple of hours before finally growing too weary of words. Then they bedded down close to each other, curled up companionably against the cold, until the first fingers of light reached beneath the tent flap to tickle them out of their slumber. By the time the breakfast bell clanged they were up and dressed, eager to begin the final push towards home.

They could see the towers of Winterfell rising out of the snow, the sight of which gladdened Jon’s heart. He turned in his saddle and nodded at the young squire that kept a couple of respectful paces behind him.

“It’s time to unfurl the banner”, said Jon.

The boy reached down to his left and unbuckled the pole and raised it, the lone banner of its kind amongst those of the Merman’s Court. It depicted a white direwolf with blood red eyes rampant on a field of grey, a parting gift from Lord Manderly.

“It was made in haste so it’s a bit rough”, said Manderly as he presented it to Jon.

Jon was touched by the man’s thoughtfulness.

“You honour me, my lord”, said Jon as he held it up. “I couldn’t have asked for better”.

“You’ve earned it, lad”, said Manderly heartily, giving him a slap on the back. “You’ve done your family proud”.

Satin broke into Jon’s thoughts with a request.

“Jon…would you allow me to do the honour of carrying your colours?” he asked.

Jon looked both surprised and pleased.

“Brother…how could I refuse such a request”, he said as he motioned to the boy to pass over the banner.

They heard the shouts coming from the towers and the battlements echoing across the fields as they neared the castle. The heavy gate groaned as metal scraped against metal before releasing a party of riders who trotted out to meet them.
He heard her voice shouting to him as she broke away from the pack.

She thundered across the packed snow, urging her horse to move faster. He thought he might scold her for pushing her horse so hard until he saw her face and his stern words melted away.

He dismounted as soon as she pulled up and jumped off her mount. Within two strides she was all over him, throwing her arms around his neck and planting a loud, wet kiss upon his cheek. Then she drew back and looked around expectantly.

“What is he?” asked Arya. “Where’s my long lost little brother?”

Jon turned and roared.

“Rickon…you’re home”, he shouted. “Come greet your sister, Arya”.

He could see Rickon emerge from the rear and slowly dismount his pony. He was shy and hesitant before the exuberant young woman with the dark, unbound hair.

Jon could see that she longed to embrace Rickon, too, but the look on his face caused her to restrain herself. Instead, she thrust out a slender hand.

“Welcome home, brother”, she said with a gentle smile. “We’ve missed you”.

Rickon glanced at Jon before taking her hand and shaking it.

Jon could see a look of impatience pass over her face before she grabbed Rickon and pulled him close.

“Oh, sod the formalities”, she declared as she gripped the boy tightly. “Another stray pup has returned to the pack and I, for one, couldn’t be happier”.

While Rickon squirmed in protest, Jon felt a tap on his shoulder. Val leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“I have to pee”, she said. “I can slip into the woods but it would be nice to use a privy again”.

Jon chuckled and ordered everyone to mount up again. It was time to complete the final leg of their journey.

After passing through the front gate, they found the forecourt teeming with people. Satin immediately took charge of directing Jon’s men to quarters and arranging the stabling of the horses while Arya disappeared with Val. For a brief moment, Jon stood seemingly alone amongst the swirl of activity, watching the inhabitants of Winterfell as they went about their mundane daily tasks and realized, with some chagrin, just how many he recognized from the Wall. He searched their faces for a glimpse of Tormund, Soren or Jeyne but his efforts were in vain. His request for news of their fate from Edd was met with a helpless shrug as Edd had been too long on the road and too out of touch with those who manned the Wall.

“They have come here, Jon Snow, looking for sanctuary”, he heard Melisandre’s voice whisper urgently in one ear. “The Great Other is due to cross any day now so we must be prepared. The Red God has chosen you to be his champion…will you be ready?”

He quickly turned his head to reply only to discover that she was not standing by his shoulder. He swallowed his words and turned every which way to locate her, eventually spying her several yards away, serenely watching the smoke from the blacksmith’s fiery forge as it twisted and climbed towards the sky. Jon blinked and wondered how she could have moved away from him so swiftly.
Or, he wondered, perhaps she had not spoken the words at all. He sighed inwardly...I expect I’ll be haunted by more rambling thoughts if I don’t put my head down soon and close my eyes for a few minutes.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by the jostling of the passing throng. He pushed his way through the crowd of people streaming by and discovered Rickon and Shireen watching a puppet show. Osha stood like a silent specter by Rickon’s side, seemingly immune to the laughter that infected the other patrons. The children did not notice Jon at first as they were both thoroughly engrossed by the antics of the two puppets as a puppeteer tugged on their strings. The crowd that had gathered around roared with laughter as the puppets screamed and pummeled each other while shouting guttural epithets. Then, after the inevitable reconciliation, the show concluded with the puppets frantically dancing to a lively tune played by the accompanying musician on his flute. Jon recognized the song as one from his childhood and tapped one foot in time to the music while the children linked arms and swung each other around. When the music ended with a flourish, the puppets dropped to the ground with the children following suit, screeching with laughter as they tumbled over each other in the dirt. As the performers took a bow, Jon threw a few coins into the pay box, pleased to see the looks of delight displace the looks of exhaustion on Shireen and Rickon’s faces.

As the crowd dispersed and the children’s peals of laughter subsided, Jon heard a chorus of female voices calling to him. He looked over his shoulder to a sight which flooded his heart with warmth. Val and Arya were beckoning to him. And standing behind them, tall and regal, was his sister, Sansa.

Jon and Sansa had never been especially close growing up. She was more interested in developing her skills as the lady of proud house. She excelled at needlework, singing and dancing, all while honing her courtesies whereas Arya preferred to engage in banging wooden swords with her brothers, firing off arrows until her fingers bled and racing her ponies across the windswept meadows. Rarely were two sisters so contrary and yet now, as they approached him, he realized just how perfectly they complemented each other. Together they would be a force to be reckoned with.

Jon paused for a beat or two, raking it in...the three most important women in his life were arrayed before him. Arya was clearly on alert, suspicious of anyone who strayed too close to her little family. She kept one hand hovering over the pommel of the sword that swung at her hip and the other near Sansa’s elbow. Sansa looked, to all outward appearances, cool and aloof. But her eyes, those blue Tully eyes, betrayed her...they were a gateway to the emotions simmering beneath her surface. Jon could see her lips tremble as her eyes darted from Jon to Rickon and then back again. Jon took the hand that she held out to him, noting how tightly she squeezed it as she murmured that it had been far too long since they last parted. Then she knelt before her younger brother, tears welling in her eyes, and reached out with both hands to grip his thin shoulders.

Val leaned against Jon’s side as they watched his siblings’ reunion. Sansa wasn’t as effusive as Arya but the happiness she felt as she reconnected with her brothers was no less heartfelt. Val clasped Jon’s hand in hers and wiped away a stray tear.

“Don’t pay me no mind...it’s just the baby making me soft”, she muttered.

Sansa stood up, recomposed her face and folded her hands demurely.

“All of you look so weary”, she said, “I’ll have you shown to your rooms anon. Get some rest and we’ll meet again for the evening meal. I’ve arranged for a lovely feast in honour of your homecoming”.

They gathered again in the great hall with Sansa presiding over the festivities. She exercised the skill she learned at her mother’s knee as she circulated amongst the guests, arranging to have more drink
and food brought to their tables and exchanging pleasantries. Arya, on the other hand, stuck with the younger men, flirting and trading quips until she was summoned to the table on the dais by her sister.

Although Sansa had dispensed with much of the pageantry of the feasts of old, she still maintained a certain protocol to the proceedings. It was family only seated on the dais while their closest supporters sat nearby. Melisandre and Shireen were seated close while Osha was seated further away with most of the household staff. Jon spied Satin among them, seated close to a young man that Jon recognized from the blacksmith’s forge…a young man with a bright thatch of blonde hair and a reddish, open face that reminded Jon of Soren. Satin and the blacksmith’s apprentice appeared to be very friendly…almost intimate in Jon’s estimation. He nudged Val and discreetly raised a finger to point them out. She smiled in approval.

“Maybe there’s more than meets the eye”, she whispered.

The meal was reminiscent of Jon’s youth…long, hot and loud. The food was plentiful enough but it was apparent that there was a certain amount of rationing being taken into consideration. The ale and wine, however, were flowing. When the final course had been served and the dishes had been removed, Val excused herself.

“I’m going to sit with Osha”, she said as she pushed back her chair. “She looks like she could use some company”.

Arya had left the table already, as had Rickon who joined Shireen. Jon glanced over at Sansa who sat impassively nearby…still sipping her wine while occasionally smiling and nodding. Otherwise, she appeared to be somewhat disengaged from the activity that surrounded her.

He waited until she had supped more than a couple of cups of wine before he broached the subject.

“Sansa…what happened to you after Father’s death?” he asked. “I tried to get some details out of Arya but she was rather evasive about what happened to the both of you”.

It was like a shutter closed over Sansa’s eyes and she took another sip of wine. Jon sensed that she was stalling for words. When she finally spoke, her voice was flat and emotionless.

“In a nutshell…I was beaten and betrayed by those who wished to possess me both body and soul”, she replied.

Jon felt himself stiffen with rage.

“Who…who did this to you?” he snarled. “Give me their names and I’ll deal with them”.

She winced before reaching out to take his hand.

“Their names no longer matter”, she replied, her voice faltering slightly.

Jon curled his fingers around her hand, gripping it firmly.

“We cannot let our enemies go unpunished”, he said softly.

She let out a mirthless chuckle and gently disengaged her hand from his grasp. Then she raised her cup and took another drink of wine.

“Most of them are gone now”, she said as she set her cup back on the table. “I…I had a champion who exacted vengeance on my behalf…on behalf of House Stark”.
Jon was curious and leaned in closer.

“A champion”, he said, his voice tinged with surprise and admiration. “I would like to meet this champion, Sansa, so I can thank him”.

A secretive look passed over her face as she lowered her eyes and took another sip.

“It is no one, Jon”, she murmured into her cup. “Please…just let the matter rest, for now. There’s a time and place for everything and now is neither”.

Jon drew back and gave her a curt nod. He could only guess what secrets his sister kept close to her heart…he could only hope that one day she would bring them out to share with him.

As the numbers dwindled during the night, Jon caught Val’s attention as she was in mid-yawn. He ended up carrying her off to bed, just shy of their rooms, when she slumped against the wall and slid down to the floor. Then she curled up on the cold, stone floor after declaring the castle to be “too fuckin’ big” and that this was as far as she was willing to go. Jon decided that too much wine was to blame rather than simple fatigue.

“C’mon then”, he said.

He picked her up with a grunt, cradling her in his arms while she clung to his neck and rested her head against his shoulder.

After laying her on the bed, Jon tried to undress her. But she batted away his hands as he tugged at the laces and before long she had rolled on to one side and was asleep within seconds.

Jon was sitting on the edge of the bed removing his boots when a roaring sound began to build in his ears, blocking out all other noises, including Val’s snoring. He looked around the room frantically looking for the source of the noise as it continued to build in volume. He boxed his ears when it became unbearable and crossed the room see if the noise came from outside. But after peering into the darkness of the yard, lit only by the light of the moon glancing off the glistening snow, he could detect nothing amiss. Then, just as he began to despair, the noise began to gradually fade away until only a faint ringing sound could be heard.

Gods, he thought as he closed the shutters, what in seven hells was that?
Chapter 16

Jon stood on the battlements, bathed in the light of the full moon as it reflected off the freshly fallen snow. As he exhaled his breath curled around in the still, frosty air. He watched silently, only nodding as the other guards passed by offering their greetings. He tugged at the collar of his dark grey cloak and pulled down the fur lined earflaps of his leather cap to keep the cold at bay. While doing so he juggled the helm from hand to hand before tucking it once again under his left arm. The helm had been a gift from Sansa.

“It is very beautiful”, said Val in some awe when she examined it. It was fashioned out of steel and coated in pale silver, so pale that at times it took on an eerie white glow. It depicted a wolf’s head with rubies serving as it eyes. It was a magnificent piece of craftsmanship but Jon refused to wear it.

“It is far too impractical for such a cold climate”, he added. “There’s little to no protection from a fierce northeast wind. And when my nose starts to drip…well, it could cause the skin to freeze to the faceplate”.

Val rapped her knuckles on the top of the helm.

“It’s meant to protect your head in the heat of battle”, she said with a sigh. “It’s not meant to keep your head warm”.

She thrust it out towards him but he wouldn’t reach out to take it.

“It’s too ostentatious”, he said, his arms folded.

Her eyebrows shot up in amusement.

“Tormund would wear it”, she replied with a throaty laugh. “C’mon, Jon…make your sister happy. You don’t have to wear it all the time you’re pacing those walls…only when it looks like somebody’s set to strike you”.

She waggled the helm in front of him as if it was an enticement he shouldn’t resist. After glowering at her for a few seconds he reluctantly snatched it from her hands.

Jon had taken up his watch duties for a fortnight and a half ago, much to Val’s dismay.

“Are you sure?” she asked repeatedly as she watched him ready himself for his latest shift.

He buckled on his belt and nodded.

“I’m sure”, he replied, his tone resolute.

“But…how can you know?” she insisted.

He cast his tired eyes upon her…his badger-like eyes, Val had teased, because of the dark circles that now ringed them.

“Truthfully…I know nothing. But I do have a feeling…a persistent itch, as it were, that won’t go away no matter how often I scratch it”, he said.

He now scanned the outer edges of the snowy fields looking for signs of movement, a glint of light…anything that indicated possible intruders but so far his watch had yielded nothing. Then he
heard his name and turned to find Val holding out a cup towards him.

“Sam says this will help keep you warm seeing as how you insist on remaining out here”, she said.

Jon took a long sip and then coughed violently.

“What is this?” he asked, his voice still hoarse after clearing it a couple of times.

“He says it’s called rum, made from sugars grown on the Summer Islands”, she replied. “A gift from a grateful mariner from those parts…Sam says he treated the man’s rash, clearing it up before he landed in White Harbour”.

“It burns”, croaked Jon. “I’ll wager the man used it to remove old paint from the deck. I can’t see why anyone would ever willingly throw this down his neck”.

Val took the cup from his hand, took a sniff and then a quick sip.

“I’ve tasted worse”, she said with a shrug. She poured the contents of the cup over the side of the wall before setting the cup down. Then she gently removed the helm from beneath his arm and laid it next to the cup.

“I’ll stay and keep you warm then for a while”, she said cheerfully as she linked arms with him.

They stood together for a few minutes, the silence broken only by the high pitched cry of a snowy owl responding to the call of her mate. Then the blast of a war horn split the air. Jon immediately tensed up and turned to Val, urging her to go back inside and alert the others. Meanwhile, the other men on watch returned their own warning and men began to muster along the walls and around the gates.

Val heard Jon shouting “to arms” as she hurried down the stone steps, trying not to lose her footing in all the commotion. The archers shoved their way past her on their way up while barrels of pitch thundered over her head as they were rolled out.

She heard a second blast of the war horn as she crossed the yard, followed by distant shouting. Then she heard Jon’s voice rising above the din…hold, he cried, hold. The archers released the tension on their bows and awaited further orders.

Val stopped and waited with them, almost holding her breath as she tried to make out the words being shouted from beyond Winterfell’s walls. Then she realized who it was that approached.

“It’s Tormund”, she cried. “Jon, it’s Tormund…tell the men to stand down”.

While Jon issued the orders Val flew to the front gate, followed by Jon shouting orders to open it. Tormund, leading a ragtag group of men, women and children, staggered through the open gates. Val rushed to greet him.

“Eeeh, lass…tis good to see you again”, he said as he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet before setting her back down again. Then he thrust out a hand.

“You, too, lad…you, too”, he laughed as he shook Jon’s hand vigorously. “You’re both a sight for these weary old eyes”.

A shrill scream suddenly split the air, silencing everyone momentarily. Then guards began to rush the gate while others craned their necks to see what was happening. Tormund placed a hand on Jon’s as
he began to draw Longclaw from its scabbard.

“Now, it’s not what you think”, Tormund began as they could hear the woman’s screams devolve into loud sobs.

He was interrupted by Val.

“Soren”, she shouted.

Soren was angrily shoving away some guards, seemingly trying to make room for a small oxcart that was being pushed through the gate. And lying in the oxcart was Jeyne Poole. Her face was ashen, her eyes were like two pieces of coal and her hair lay dank, plastered against her forehead. She was shivering and whimpering under the pile of furs that lay atop her. As she took Val’s proffered hand, she began to let out a low, guttural sound like that of a dying animal. Val grabbed one of the guards and told him to fetch a maester.

“She don’t need no maester”, growled Soren, blocking the man’s path. Val was flustered, puzzling over Soren’s callousness when she felt Jeyne’s fingers tighten around hers.

Jeyne gritted her teeth and emitted a piteous moan. Her face was knotted in pain and she hung on to Val’s hand as if her life depended on. When she let out another guttural scream while bearing down, her free hand resting on her distended belly, Val finally realized the truth... Jeyne was in labour. She shouted frantically for the crowd to part and let them through.

“Fetch a midwife’, she cried. “We’ve got a woman about to give birth here’.

Soren picked up a whimpering Jeyne in his arms and allowed Val to lead him through the entrance near the kitchen. Much to her relief word had reached Gilly who was rushing out to intercept them.

“There’s a small cot in the antechamber to Sam’s maester’s quarters”, said Gilly breathlessly as she led them through the maze of corridors.

Sam was already waiting for them outside his rooms when they arrived.

“It’s a bit tight but it should be big enough for everyone concerned”, he said brightly, as he patted Jeyne’s back. Jeyne responded by screwing up her face and letting out a loud howl while digging her fingers into Soren’s shoulders.

Val could hear high pitched voices echoing off the walls and drawing closer. Gilly quickly thanked Sam with a quick peck on the cheek and then made sweeping motions with her hands.

“G’wan now…and take this young man with you”, said Gilly as three woman rounded the corner into view. “This is woman’s work. I’ll send for you if we needs you”.

“Just a tick”, said Sam as he opened a drawer. He removed a battered looking horn and tucked it into the pocket of his tunic before making signaling Soren to follow him out the door.

Soren was reluctant to leave but, after tenderly laying Jeyne on the cot, he eventually lumbered off to the kitchen with Sam...but only after the other woman repeatedly reassured him that Jeyne would be well attended.

Jon and Tormund were already ensconced in the warm kitchen, exchanging laughs and pouring out ale. They greeted the newcomers with a raise of their mugs, urging them to join them.

“Don’t you worry none, lad”, said Tormund with a slap on Soren’s back. “Between them those
women have caught hundreds of babies”.

Sam pushed a mug of ale towards Soren.

“Gilly has helped deliver dozens of her sisters’ babies”, he said. “Your wife will be in good hands… and you’ll be a father soon enough”.

Soren opened his mouth for a second as if to say something but then thought better of it. Instead he raised the mug to his lips and took a long drink before setting it down again.

“Aye”, repeated Soren, “I’ll be a father soon enough”.

He fingered his mug and stared moodily at the battered table top, taking little or no notice of the conversation carrying on around him.

“When did you know?” asked Jon quietly.

Tormund set his mug on the table and drew the back of his hand over his mouth.

“We were about a fortnight out when we heard it fall”, he replied. “The earth trembled before hundreds of crows took flight…so many that for a brief moment they blotted out the sun, turning sky black. Then we climbed up to the top of a steep hill to look back and we could see that it was gone”.

Tormund stared at his cup for a few seconds before continuing.

“They’re coming for us, Jon”, he whispered. “It won’t take no time at all…they don’t need to eat and they don’t need to sleep. It won’t take them long to get here. And they’ll be swelling their numbers as they pass through each and every hamlet…there’s always them too foolish to leave, even in the face of imminent peril”.

Tormund took another gulp of ale.

“I don’t know how the fuck we’re going to hold them off”, he said, slumping in his chair. “I really don’t”.

“Arya and Satin are on their way with a shipment of obsidian from Dragonstone”, said Sam brightly. “And we have been filling drums with pitch and oil at a feverish pace”.

Jon shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“Aye”, he said, “that’s all well and good but eventually we’re going to run out. As then, as we die off, we’ll become fodder for their army”.

Sam leaned forward, looking left and right.

“Not if we had dragons”, he whispered with a knowing smile.

The three other men stared at him for a few seconds before bursting into laughter. Sam folded his arms looking decidedly unabashed by their mockery. Jon was almost choking on his reply.

“The dragons have been dead for over two hundred years, Sam”, he said. “And before they died off they were the size of cats…hardly the stuff to use against an army of the undead”.

Sam lifted his chin slightly, still undeterred.

“Before I left the Citadel”, he began, “there were reports of a Targaryen queen marching out of the
east with a horde of Dothraki screamers and an army of eunuch warriors at her back…and three enormous dragons”.

The look of amusement on Jon’s face died.

“How enormous?” he asked.

Sam tilted his head to one side.

“Large enough to raze a city to the ground between the three of them, I reckon”, he replied with a small smile.

Jon glanced at the others before continuing this line of questioning.

“How enormous?” he asked.

“Do they know what her intentions are?” he asked.

“She intends to take back the Iron Throne…through fire and blood, if necessary”, said Sam.

Jon folded his arms.

“Do you know how to reach this dragon queen?” he asked.

Sam’s smug expression faltered.

“Her name is Daenerys, Aerys’ daughter, and the last I heard she was outside of Meereen, looking for enough ships to transport her troops across the Narrow Sea”, he replied. “Apparently she is being met with some resistance…Slaver’s Bay is in chaos with the outbreak of the Pale Mare spreading inland”.

Jon looked thoughtful.

“See if you can ferret out more information…the sooner the better, if possible”, said Jon. “Time is definitely not on our side”.

“Aye”, replied Sam, “I’ll do that. If you need me I’ll be in the rookery. I’ve many letters of warning to write and send out tonight and I need to ready the ravens”.

As Sam rose to his feet the horn fell from his pocket and bounced along the floor, making a clattering noise. Jon leaned down to scoop it up.

“I surprised you still have this old thing”, he said examining it.

“I’ve been going through the old histories of the north looking for clues to its provenance”, said Sam reaching out for the horn. “It…it has to mean something or why else would somebody take the trouble to bury it along with a cache of obsidian?”

Jon glanced at Sam before raising the horn to his lips. He blew into the mouthpiece but no sound escaped apart from the sudden rush of his breath. He lowered it and handed it back to Sam who shoved it back into his pocket before turning towards the door. But he paused when he heard the low rumble begin to rise beneath his feet and the room began to sway. For a few seconds they all gripped the edges of the table and listened to clatter of dishes falling from the open shelves until the shuddering finally stopped. They looked at each other, equally nonplussed, hearing now only shouts from all corners as everyone scrambled to determine the source of the disturbance. And in the ensuing confusion a squalling infant was brought into their midst.

“A boy”, Gilly gushed, “it’s a sweet babby boy…with powerful lungs, no less. He’s been screaming
since we left his mother’s side”.

Tenderly cradling the boy in her arms, she approached Soren.

“Would you like to hold your son, Soren?” she asked, pushing the blanket away from the child’s reddened face.

There was a hesitant, almost shy, air about Soren as he held out his meaty hands. Then he held the boy stiffly in his arms as if the boy was the most fragile creature in the world.

“There, there”, he murmured as the baby continued to wail.

The other men crowded around him to admire the child. Tormund patted Soren’s back in congratulations and poured him more ale, to “wet the baby’s head” as it were.

When Val appeared, peering over Gilly’s shoulder, Jon excused himself.

“How is Jeyne?” he asked after bestowing a kiss on her cheek.

She shook her head, looking worried.

“She refused to take the baby in her arms…she won’t even look at him”, she whispered. “Gilly was at her wit’s end trying to coax her into at least holding him”.

She looked momentarily guilty when she glanced over Jon’s shoulder and could see Soren staring at her.

“Is something wrong with Jeyne?” he asked.

The conversation swirling around them began to die as all eyes turned towards Val. She suddenly felt tongue tied.

“Nowt…nowt’s wrong with Jeyne”, she began cautiously. “She’s…she’s just not takin’ to motherhood like we expected. But I’m sure she’ll come round soon enough”.

Gilly dove in to intervene.

“It can be frightenin’ for some…you know…being a mother for the first time”, she added. “Suddenly you have this tiny helpless person who relies on you for every little thing…it can be overwhelmin’”.

Soren bent down and kissed the child’s downy head.

“Nah…it ain’t bein’ a mother that’s puttin’ her off the wee one”, he said. “It’s because of who his father is”.

As everyone stared at Soren he realized they still hadn’t twigged to the truth.

“I’m not the boy’s father”, he stated bluntly, “he is…Ramsay Bolton”.

“Ah, fuck me blind”, swore Tormund under his breath.

Val leaned in closer to Jon.

“Sansa is with her now…trying to calm her down”, she said softly.

Jon let out a deep sigh and turned towards Soren.
“Are you still prepared to be a father to this child no matter who sired him?” asked Jon.

He could see signs of love already forming in Soren’s face as he tightened his grip on the little child. The boy was whimpering softly now as he nestled into Soren’s chest.

“Of course”, he said hoarsely after clearing his throat. “I’ll not blame an innocent child for the sins of the man who planted his seed in his mother’s womb”.

“Come on, then”, said Val, “Jeyne needs to hear this from your own lips…then mebbe she’ll change her mind”.

The small chamber was hushed when they entered. Apart from the fire that crackled cheerily on the grate there was silence. Jeyne lay on her side staring at the fire. Sansa lay curled up beside her, stroking Jeyne’s damp hair.

Jon pulled up a chair next to the bed and bid Soren and the baby take a seat by Jeyne’s side while he and Val rounded the bed and stood next to Sansa.

“Jeyne, sweetheart,” said Soren softly, “please…please look at your little son.

He looked so appealing that Val marveled that Jeyne continued to stare past them. Sansa sat up and tucked her arms around her knees.

“Jeyne…at least speak to Soren…you owe him that much”, said Sansa.

Jeyne let out a deep sigh and switched her gaze to Soren’s stricken face. She reached out to cup his cheek and gave him a wan smile.

“I do love you”, she said in a small, sad voice. “I truly do. But I cannot find it in my heart to love this child…he would be a constant reminder of what his father…did to me”.

Soren wiped away a tear from his eye with the palm of his hand.

Sansa slid off the mattress and rounded the foot of the bed until she stood next to Soren. Then she leaned down and stretched out her arms.

“Give him to me”, she said. It was clear that this not so much a request as a command.

Soren looked confused while Jeyne nodded before leaning back against the pillow, shifting her gaze to the ceiling.

“Sansa has agreed to raise him”, said Jeyne, her voice flat. The turning over of her son to her childhood companion had all the emotional resonance of a financial transaction.

“No”, said Soren, “you can’t give him away like that…he may remind you of Ramsay but this boy…this baby is half yours, Jeyne. Look at him…he has your eyes and your pretty hair”.

Jeyne’s lips quivered but her face remained resolute. She shook her head.

“It is done”, she said as she turned to face the wall. “Now I don’t wish to discuss this any longer”.

Sansa gently took the baby from Soren’s arms. He did not resist. Then she nodded at Jon and Val to accompany her.

“She needs rest and…comfort”, said Sansa to Soren. “I’ll arrange to have Gilly return anon to bind her breasts”.

The servants nodded discreetly at Sansa as she swept past with the baby in her arms. They regarded her with thinly veiled curiosity, assured that later word would spread quickly that the Starks had taken on a new ward, one who would be raised as a wolf, not a flayer.

“It is very kind of you to take on the task of raising another woman’s son”, said Jon.

Sansa uttered a short, brittle laugh.

“Unlike how my mother raised you, this child will be raised with love and kindness”, she said as she nuzzled the infant who stirred briefly in her arms. “But before you regard me as being completely altruistic, never lose sight that this child is the heir to the Dreadfort and its accompanying lands. Since I am the temporary warden of the north the surviving members of the Bolton family have been making overtures to me, making a claim for the Dreadfort with their mouths dripping fealty. But the north remembers, Jon, and if I accomplish nothing else in this life I intend to rid us of the Boltons once and forever. I know that Jeyne, despite being Ramsay’s widow, will never seek to set foot on Bolton land and make her claim. But her son…this child…will be raised in the full knowledge that it will all be his when he comes of age. And I will ensure that he will remain loyal to me…to the Starks…forever”.

Jon had never seen Sansa look so fierce and passionate as she held Jeyne’s son firmly against her breast. They accompanied her as far as the door to the old nursery where she was met by a young woman who took the sleeping baby from Sansa’s arms.

“Betha will care for him and engage the services of a wet nurse”, she said pulling the door closed. Then she reached out to take Val’s hand.

“Thank you for being so kind to her while she laboured”, said Sansa. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be with her…I’m…I’m sorry for everything she had to suffer. She never deserved any of this”.

A haunted look passed over her eyes as if a bad memory had momentarily resurfaced before being pushed back down. Recovering her composure, she made her excuses as she had pressing matters to attend to.

“Father never warned us about the endless petitions and paperwork to read and sign”, she said briskly as she turned in the direction of her solar. “Who would have thought that there would be so much administrative work to do to stave off the end of the world?”

She paused for a second later to issue an additional request.

“Jon, do be a dear and muster up some men to check for possible damage as a result of the tremors”, she said, half-turned towards them. “Minor repairs can wait until morning but I fear that yet another wall tumbling down in the night could spell death for us all”.

They waited until Sansa was out of sight before speaking to each other.

“Woe betide any man who crosses your sisters”, whispered Val. “Whatever man they choose to take for a husband had best be prepared”.

Jon chuckled lightly.

“I don’t believe that will ever come to pass”, he said. “Arya has always maintained that she will never be beholden to any man so I expect marriage is not in her future. And although Sansa was married to Tyrion Lannister, the marriage was annulled due to non-consummation. And her subsequent engagement ended when the groom-to-be, Harry, died under rather mysterious circumstances. She confided to me recently that she intends to never take another husband…that she
will devote her life, as it were, to the governance of the north”.

When they entered their chambers, Jon went straight to the wardrobe to retrieve his warmest cloak which he threw around his shoulders and fastened with the direwolf clasp that Arya had gifted him upon their return. When he turned around he found Val standing near the door with the new helm resting on her hands and a cheeky smile on her face.

“Safety first”, she reminded him.

He rolled his eyes before taking the helm from her and tucking it beneath his cloak. She reached up to draw the fur up around his face and kiss him lightly on the lips.

“Wake me when you return”, she said.

Jon raised his eyebrows.

“It might be rather late”, he said.

She shrugged, slipping her arms around him and pressing herself against him.

“I don’t mind”, she replied before delivering a deeper kiss.

They parted with the promise of further intimacy.

Armed with torches, Jon and a small group of men did a cursory inspection, noting areas that required immediate attention and leaving some builders to shore up the damage with a temporary fix until more permanent repairs could be made later. As they approached the entrance to the crypts, they could hear the sound of banging coming from within. Sansa had ordered all entrances to the crypt sealed off that morning to prevent future incursions. As Jon and his party drew closer they could muffled cries coming from the other side of the ancient door.

“For the love of all the gods please let me out”, were the words they heard once they reached the door.

Jon stood aside as the thick boards were pried away from the door and it was wrenched open. A white-haired man stumbled out and fell to the ground sobbing. Two of the men pulled him to his feet and he stood there between them, quivering like leaf that could be blown away with single puff of wind. He was gaunt, with missing fingers and missing teeth, panting in fear as his eyes darted between the two men who grimly hung on to him.

“Who are you and what were you doing down there?” asked Jon.

The man pulled himself up and tried to shake off the two guards but to no avail.

“No one…. please…tell them to let me go”, pleaded the man, struggling to enunciate his words. “I swear I’ve done no wrong”.

Jon stared at him for a second before grabbing the collar of the man’s heavily soiled shirt and pulling him closer. Then he motioned for a torch to be brought nearer so he could examine the man’s face. The man’s pitiful condition and his apparent age simply didn’t add up but the eyes…the eyes never lie.

“Theon fucking Greyjoy”, said Jon softly before giving the man a swift shove.

Theon would have tumbled to the ground if the two men hadn’t been hanging on to him.
“Jon…please don’t kill me”, said Theon. “There’s something down there…in the crypts…something I need to show you”.

She was back home in the small one-room cottage near the lake…the one in which she was born…the one from which her earliest memories were born. Her mother was stirring porridge in the heavy black cauldron suspended over the open fire. Her face was red with perspiration, standing so close to the fire, and she wiped it away with a corner of her apron.

“Don’t give up, Val…you’re very close”, said her sister, Dalla.

She was kneeling by Val’s side squeezing her hand tightly.

“Just one more push, Val”, said Gilly. “I can see the head crowning”.

Val stared at her swollen belly and it dawned on her that she was giving birth and yet she felt no pain apart from the feeling of pressure to make water.

“Hurry up, girls”, said her mother impatiently. “Breakfast is almost ready”.

Jeyne suddenly appeared, hovering anxiously above her, her hands outstretched.

“Good girl”, exclaimed Gilly. “There’s the head…now just one more gentle push so I can release the shoulder and…there”.

Gilly’s face was triumphant as she pulled a newborn baby, slick and blotchy, from between Val’s parted legs. She could hear Dalla’s whispers of congratulations in her ear as the baby began to wail, his lusty cries filling the air. She looked around in bewilderment as it seemed so familiar and yet it was completely nonsensical.

She heard Jeyne say “give him to me” and she looked up. But this pale, unknown creature was no longer Jeyne and she felt herself growing cold and dead inside.

“Please don’t take him away from me”, she heard herself frantically whisper. She could see the light in the room begin to dim and everyone gradually faded away until she found herself alone in silence. The air around her was becoming colder with her every breath and she shivered as she struggled to her feet. She stared into the empty void looking for a pinpoint of light, a tiny beacon of hope, but she could see nothing. She called out for her mother and her sister…knowing full well they were both gone now. Then she screamed until she thought her heart would burst out of her chest before collapsing on the floor.

“Jon”, she moaned, “where are you…have they taken you away, too?”

She sat bolt upright in bed. She was partially uncovered after having kicked off some of the furs during the night. Her heart was still pounding as she groped the empty sheets next to her. Jon had still not come to bed and her bladder was full to bursting.

Her hands shook as she struck the flint and lit a candle, immediately comforted by its glowing flame. She padded barefoot across the floor, the rushes crackling beneath her feet, towards the privy. As she passed by the fireplace, she could see that the fire had burned down to a few embers and she made a mental note to add a few more logs to the fire before crawling back into bed.

T’was the hour of the wolf and her heart sped up when she first heard the rasp of claws at her door. She froze and waited for a few seconds, willing her heart to slow down and listen to reason. It could be Ghost, she thought, heralding Jon’s return. The ancient hinges groaned as she pulled open the
door and found the direwolf waiting for her. She peeked down the corridor in both directions, expecting to see Jon strolling towards her but there was no sign of him.

She stood aside and waited for the direwolf to enter and curl up in his usual place by the fire. But this time he remained still and silent as if waiting on her. Normally she would have said “suit yourself” with a shrug and closed the door on him. But whether it was due to the lingering effects of her dream or whether it was due to Jon’s words echoing in her head…Ghost isn’t just my friend, he had told her once, Ghost is a part of me… she left the door ajar and turned to retrieve her shoes from beneath the bed and grabbed a heavy shawl from the back of a chair.

“Lead on then”, she muttered closing the door behind her.

When she entered the yard, the air was crisp and cold with the heavy scent of wood smoke from the many fires that burned. A half-moon hung in the sky, surrounded by thousands of twinkling lights that spread themselves across the dark expanse.

The boards which had sealed the entrance to the crypt now leaned against the wall. Ghost waited patiently for her to pull open the door, allowing him to enter first. She waved her torch around briefly and licked her lips which had suddenly gone dry. The smell of mouldering bones assaulted her nostrils making her gag.

He was leading her down further than she had been before. She became aware of the stream, now rushing over her head. Occasionally she nervously glanced at the ancient statues that gravely regarded her as she stumbled past, brandishing their swords as a defense against the living. Time had eroded many of their features, their malformations now making them appear more menacing in the flickering of the torch light.

She could hear a rumbling sound coming from beneath her feet as the air became warmer and heavier with moisture. The roots of trees curled and stretched along the earthen walls, casting shadows which appeared to flutter and dart about in the passing light. She wiped away the sweat from her brow and loosened the shawl around her shoulders.

When they reached a dead end she peered around frantically until she felt a wet, hot air wafting from a freshly dug passageway. Ghost was already slipping through the opening and she clambered in after him, taking care not to bump her head on the low ceiling. The scent of damp, heavy earth and the absolute stillness felt oppressive and when she sucked in a breath of air, her lungs wanted to refuse it.

Indistinct voices drifted up to her as she moved towards them. Gradually the passageway opened up and she found herself able to stretch up to her full height. But now the slope grew steeper and she struggled to maintain her footing on the slippery mud floor. She was rewarded for her efforts by a bluish light flickering in the distance. As she grew closer she called out his name.

“Jon”, she shouted.

But her voice was drowned out by the sound of a roar beginning to build and she felt the floor beneath her begin to vibrate.

The light broadened and beckoned to her as she picked up her pace. She started to slide as she approached the entrance and reached out to grab at root growing out of the wall to stop from falling. She paused to catch her breath before raising her eyes and staring into the chamber before her. Ghost stood loyally by her side and was watching the chamber warily, his red eyes almost glowing in the reflected light. She could see the hackles rising on his neck. Despite the oppressive heat, she shivered along with him, feeling the prickling sensation of the hairs rising on her forearms.
The chamber was enormous. There were fallen obelisks, pillars of light and glittering crystals, some several feet thick… and on the walls were clumps of smaller crystals that appeared to be as sharp as blades. The floor was littered with pools of steaming water that reflected her sputtering torch light a hundredfold and ancient bones, black with mildew, of animals long gone. But these were only secondary to the winged creature that crouched in the center of the cavern… a creature, which until recently, she thought had only existed in tales told long ago.

It was several times larger than any horse she had ever ridden. Its pale, almost translucent body was covered in large bluish scales that pulsed with every breath it took. Rows upon rows of sharp teeth lined its long snout, topped by two enormous nostrils that snorted oily smoke. As it swiveled towards her she recoiled at the sight of its bulging red eyes as it fixed its gaze upon her. Jon stood next to the beast, his head bowed and his right hand resting on its scaly haunch. He seemed unaware her presence. She stood transfixed by the sight of, moving only to lift a trembling hand to wipe away at the sweat that stung her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak to him, to urge him to move away from the dangerous beast, but another voice intervened before she could speak.

“Come stand by me, lass”, said Tormund. “It’s not safe to get any closer”.

He was crouching in a dark corner behind a rock formation. He held a large wooden, battle scarred shield in front of him and shoved low on his head was Jon’s helm. Under different circumstances she might have laughed at the sight and teased him, demanding to know how he had finagled it away from Jon. Deeper in the shadows stood a guard, clearly struggling not to soil his pants, and a gaunt, white-haired man who slumped wearily against a craggy rock, his wrists bound and his head resting against his chest. The man looked utterly and totally defeated and she wondered who he could be.

She and Ghost slunk slowly over to Tormund’s side before ducking down beside him. She was full of questions, answers for which would have to wait. In the meantime, as she watched Jon remain silent and still, she feared he might be warging the fearsome beast. Val had long accepted the presence of wargs amongst her people many years past. She had often witnessed this unnatural union of human and beast, silently watching them as they lived out their lives with their familiars by their sides. But that was the point… their thralls were… familiar. They were the warm-blooded beasts of the land and sky who shared the daily lives of her people. A dragon, however, was unfamiliar… dangerous… alien… whose mere presence spelled death and destruction.

“It were that one that led us to it”, said Tormund with a jerk of his head towards the white-haired man. “Seems he’d been hiding out in the crypts… trying to avoid being discovered by the Starks by all accounts. It were him that stole the castle out from under them and got himself taken prisoner by the Bolton bastard who treated him so cruelly it’s a miracle the man can still walk and talk”.

Val stared at Theon Turncloak, wondering how he had the audacity to come back to Winterfell after all this time. Surely he must have known he would be marked for death the moment he was discovered and yet here he was, bold as brass, but a wreck of a man nonetheless.

Val could hear her blood singing in her ear as she crouched next to Tormund. Her breathing was shallow and ragged and with each intake she was keenly aware of the stink of sulphur that hung in the hazy air.

Tormund shifted and muttered that Jon’s breeches must be getting tighter now that his balls had grown to the size of apples, punctuating his remark with a gentle “har”. Val smiled and let out a slow breath, grateful for the easing of the tension that was coiling in her chest.

When Jon finally dropped his hand from the dragon the creature shook its hoary head and stretched out its wings before folding them up again. Then it let out a thunderous screech before moving rapidly towards the rear of the cavern and disappearing into the folds of darkness.
Val rose up while holding on to Ghost’s ruff. She could feel him vibrating. At the same time, Tormund struggled to his feet, then laid down his shield and removed the helm. He was still scratching his pink scalp as Jon drew closer. Val watched his pale face as he hove into view, his dark eyes flinty. He gestured towards the white-haired man as he addressed the guard.

“Get him out of here”, he barked. “Take him to the Crooked Tower and lock him in. Have enough straw sent up to make a bed and have one of the cooks bring up a plate of table scraps meant for the dogs”.

Theon raised his head to look at Jon, his mouth drooping and his eyes rheumy.

“Do you intend to lock me away forever, Jon?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “Because I’d sooner you execute me now. Release me from my pain, Jon, I beg of you. I only ask that you allow me to say a few words before you send me to my god”.

She didn’t expect to see any signs of mercy on Jon’s face but she was surprised to see flickers of conflict. Jon took a few steps closer to Theon before leaning over him, a dark, menacing figure.

“Oh, there will be words, Theon…but none that I wish to hear from your traitorous mouth just now”, he said harshly. Then he nodded at the guard.

As the guard leaned over to grab one of Theon’s arms, Tormund grabbed the other arm to help him haul the prisoner to his feet.

“I’ll go with them, shall I?” said Tormund.

Jon nodded. Then he leaned in a little closer.

“And give the men on watch fair warning”, he said. “If they see the dragon they are not to fire upon it…under any circumstances”.

Tormund looked surprised and not a little flustered. Val gaped at Jon and wondered what madness had overtaken him.

“But, Jon”, he protested, “what if the beast is bearing down on them breathing fire and looking for blood?”

Jon stared hard and shook his head.

“That will not happen”, he replied.

The skepticism on Tormund’s face was naked and unabashed. But still he nodded before turning away to help march Theon out of the chamber.

“Heed my words, old friend”, Jon called out to their departing backs. “The dragon will not hurt us”.

Tormund muttered some unintelligible words and raised a hand but did not turn around.

As she watched Theon escorted from the chamber, Val could feel the anger and fear that had been simmering inside her suddenly boil over.

“Are you mad?” she cried. “Do you think you’re some kind of god? You’re playing with people’s lives here.”

“I know that”, he replied tersely. “But we’re in a desperate situation here”.

She poked him in the chest.
“Desperation breeds recklessness, Jon”, she cautioned him. “And I didn’t make a load of promises before a heart tree just so you can make me a widow again. So just what is it that you intend to do with the beast?”

She could see his jaw flexing as he worked out a reply.

“I intend to use it as a weapon against the army of the undead that marches on us”, he said.

She stared at him, trying to work out in her mind how he was going to bend a dragon, of all creatures, to his will and use it in the upcoming war. Even the most powerful of wargs north of the Wall would be hard-pressed to control such a wild and fiery creature.

“How, Jon…how?” she pressed him.

“I will ride it”, he replied.

Her lower jaw had gone slack and her lips were parted but all words had stalled in her throat. She could hear a roar in the distance and she looked anxiously towards the dark recesses of the cavern where the dragon had disappeared. She felt nauseated as hot, fetid air began to swirl around her and the reflected torchlight began flash and multiply a hundredfold. Then Jon grabbed her and held her steady as she began to slide towards the floor.

“Val”, cried Jon, “we need to get you out of here now”.

She gave him a wan smile before turning her head to retch up the remnants of her last meal. As she stood bent over, she could feel the ground trembling beneath her feet and could hear the screeching of the dragon growing louder.

When they left the chamber, with Ghost in the lead, she leaned her head on Jon’s shoulder, allowing him to half-carry her up the steep slope. She had rarely felt so vulnerable before and she fervently wished to never feel this way again.

Once the air began to cool they stopped to rest on the tomb of an ancient Stark king. The statue of the king was much decayed and his rusty sword was no longer a threat but nevertheless she was strangely grateful for its vigilant posture. I am a defender of the north…a slayer of dragons, it seemed to say.

She felt herself regaining her equilibrium in the cooler air but Jon still wouldn’t let her go.

“You look done in”, he said, his voice full of concern. He raised the palm of her hand to his lips and kissed it gently. “It’s time you were back in bed”.

“I won’t say no”, she said wearily. “But not yet…we need to wake up your sister to tell her that a dragon is living beneath her home. And then I need to hear you explain to her how you’re going to ride it into battle against the Others”.

He chuckled before leaning forward until their foreheads touched. His breath smelled warm and sweet. Good, she thought, because it’s going to take big dose of honey to get Sansa to swallow this load of malarkey.

Sansa’s eyes were still heavy with sleep when she greeted Jon and Val in her solar. She stifled a yawn before gesturing for them to take a chair near the fire which had been stoked minutes before and then waved her servant off. Jon waited until the door was closed before launching into his account of what had occurred in the bowels of the castle. Within minutes Sansa looked fully awake.
As Jon recounted his discovery of the hidden dragon, Val watched his eyes burn bright as if lit by an internal fire. She held her tongue, only nodding when Sansa’s eyes darted in her direction looking for affirmation as this was Jon’s tale to tell. When he finished there was a heavy silence until Sansa finally let out a deep sigh.

“A dragon in our midst”, she said somberly. Then the corners of her mouth tugged up into a small smile. “Who would have believed the stories to be true then?”

Then her smile faded and her face fell into a more serious mien. She rose to her feet and began slowly pacing the floor.

“Are you absolutely sure that you will be able to…ride…this dragon?” she asked as she paused before fireplace. “I can’t imagine that it will be like breaking in a wild horse”.

Jon clasped his hands together.

“Aye…I do”, he replied. “And I do know that it won’t be any simple feat”.

Val could feel the knot of anxiety tightening in her belly yet again.

“Jon”, she snapped. “Just because you warg doesn’t give you automatic dominion over all creatures. How can you be sure that the dragon will not burn you to a crisp and gulp you down before you’ve had a chance to mount it? I want our child to have a father…I don’t want to have to tell some woeful tale of how you died indulging in such foolishness”.

She was cursing her combative words as soon as they left her mouth, partially because Jon’s penchant for making bold moves was one of the qualities that had attracted her to him in the first place. But she had seen too many children north of the Wall grow up fatherless due to similarly reckless behaviour. And if he continued to persist in this dream then she was determined to view it as mere self aggrandizement and nothing more.

She braced herself for a volley of word in return. It seemed of late that her own words would just pour out of her mouth unchecked and, in retrospect, she couldn’t fault him for taking offense. She would often blame the pregnancy but she knew that it was more than that. She had tried to convince herself that they could ride out the coming storm in relative calm behind the stout walls of Winterfell. But with each passing day, fear and anxiety threatened to overcome her. But the words did not come as expected. Instead, he remained silent, regarding her with such tenderness that she felt her cheeks burn with shame. He reached across and gently took her hand, stroking the back of it in soothing motions.

“We might be able to fend them off for a few months or more but eventually we will run out of food”, he said softly. “We are already horribly overcrowded with many mouths to feed…and we have not had the luxury of stockpiling enough rations for the numbers that continue to flock to us daily. And once we run out of food then we will slowly perish…and then the dead might become a feast for the living. That is assuming that the Others and the wights do not already have the ability to scale our walls. We really don’t know at this point what they are capable of and we have heard nothing from the houses further north of us…they may be all dead for all we know and have since joined the army of the undead and are already advancing upon us”, he explained.

He gave her hand a squeeze.

“A dragon gives us an advantage…an unanticipated weapon”, he said.

Sansa’s discreet cough served as a reminder that she was still in the room. While Jon and Val had been heatedly discussing the issue of the dragon, Sansa had withdrawn to her desk and had pulled
out a heavy ledger. She was frowning and furrowing her brow as her finger slid down the page next to the columns filled with spidery figures. After perusing the figures for a few minutes, she quietly closed the ledger and placed it back in a drawer. Then she sat with her hands clasped in front of her, resting on the desk.

“We are expecting another shipment of food and building materials from White Harbour any day now”, she reported. “And Sam has already sent another raven to place another order to be delivered as soon as possible. But…this all takes time we may not have. The winter winds are blowing and fewer ships are making the crossing as the seas become more dangerous. Soon the ice will pack the shores and the merchants will shift their trade further south. They are still taking on human cargo but that is making them prey of pirates who plunder their ships and sell their passengers off to the slavers”.

Val winced at the thought of her fellow free folk now enslaved thousands of miles away in foreign lands and offered up a silent prayer for their release from bondage.

“And when is your southern king sending aid?” asked Val harshly. “Surely he must know what is coming for us all and will send soldiers to help us”.

Sansa glanced at Jon before replying.

“The king does not have a standing army. But a few southern lords are sending troops…not all of them can ignore the stories that have been circulating”, said Sansa. “But they will only go as far as the Neck …then they will close it off by setting up a blockade to prevent the Others from venturing any further south”.

Val stared at both of them for a beat or two before bursting into laughter.

“So they really believe that will be enough?” she asked. “Do they truly intend to sacrifice the north just to save their own skins?”

She shook her head sadly.

“I know my people have had to come to terms with the Others coming for us much longer than the rest of you south of the Wall”, she exclaimed, “but it beggars belief that all you kneelers still cannot wrap your heads around what’s coming for you…all of you. And they’ll not stop until we’re all dead. They don’t care if you’re rich or poor…young or old…they’re out to bugger everyone who stands in their way”.

She suddenly rose to her feet and stood over Jon. Then, with her hands resting on his shoulders, she delivered a deep passionate kiss upon his lips before pulling back.

“You’re right…we’re going to need every speck of help we can get”, she declared fervently. “So hie you off to the catacombs and make cooing noises to that fearsome creature. Then as soon as you’ve got it all puddlelike throw a saddle across its prickly back and fly off to find those pale pricks and their undead horde…and roast them until they are nothing more than sooty ashes spread across the snow”.

Jon grinned at her.

“You’re a mad woman, you know”, he said with a chuckle.

She tugged impatiently on his hand until he stood up.

“Oh, sure…mebbe I’m the mad one”, she said. “But I’ll admit the scales have fallen from my eyes
and I’ve got my second wind now. You and Sansa have made it clear that we’re all fucked if we sit around waiting for them to come to our doorstep. So it’s time to face the cold, hard truth…nobody’s going to fight our battles for us. We are truly on our own so we need to use whatever the gods have sent our way. And if it’s an ugly, fire breathing dragon then so be it…I can grow to love the scaly beast if it has the power to deliver us from our enemies”.

Unfortunately, the dragon was nowhere to be found. Days passed with no sign of it. In the meantime, Arya and Satin returned with a load of crude obsidian and delivered to the arms makers to fashion the black, shiny mineral into all manner of weaponry. They also brought Shireen a gift of her favourite books, pressed upon them by Maester Pylos who enquired after the young princess, asking when she would return. The castle was being held in trust for her by House Blackberry.

Shireen had been vague about returning to her father’s holdfast. Sansa suspected that it would be a lonely and desolate place for the young girl and did not press the issue. T’would be better that she remain here with us, she reasoned. Despite the impending doom Sansa couldn’t stop herself from plotting future alliances. We could foster her, she decided, and, eventually, an alliance between the Starks and the Baratheons could finally be sealed with a marriage between Shireen and Rickon. They already seemed to get on well enough. Shireen was helping Rickon with his reading and his sums and he was proving to be an apt pupil under her tutelage.

When Lady Melisandre learned of the dragon’s existence, she accompanied Jon into the crystal cave to seek it out.

“Fire made flesh”, she whispered as she surveyed the dragon’s lair.

She closed her eyes, keening softly before taking a deep breath of the acrid air. Then she laid a hand on Jon’s arm and he felt his skin growing hot under her touch. Her eyes flickered open before boring into his as she offered him a few words.

“The Lord of Light created the first dragons thousands of years ago, allowing them to roam the plains of the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai. It is believed that as they spread out across the lands to the north, south and west they brought great power to the places where they stopped to rest. With every beat of their leathery wings they directed the flow of energy through the physical world. They reigned supreme over the skies above and the earth below, gatekeepers to other worlds and guardians of the mysteries of the universe. Men bowed down before their majesty until they were discovered by the ancient Valyrians sheltering in the molten rocks of the Fourteen Flames. The Valyrians were a canny lot and familiar with the ways of magic. They bent the dragons to their collective will and used them to lay waste to their enemies”, she said, her eyes filled with rapture.

She wrapped her fingers around Jon’s forearm and held fast.

“This is a greater gift from the Lord of Light than I could have imagined”, she said hoarsely. “We must give him his due”.

Jon stiffened and watched her warily. Normally he paid her no heed when she spoke of her visions in the fires or her proselytizing openly in the marketplace. So while he didn’t actively deter her from practicing her faith, feeling that he owed her that much, he wasn’t prepared to indulge her to point of harm. Already anticipating her words he spoke swiftly and harshly to put a halt to them.

“No”, he said firmly.

She clutched at him wildly.

“You don’t understand, Jon Snow”, she cried, her voice rising in desperation. “There have been no
reports of the dragon being seen for several days now. So it is possible that we will never see it again unless a sacrifice is made to our Lord. We must give thanks...he has chosen you to be his champion...appropriate respect must be shown. You must not turn your back on him now”.

Jon looked down upon her with some measure of pity but still filled with resolve.

“No”, he repeated. “Not even an animal sacrifice...we have too many mouths to feed and we cannot afford to waste any livestock”.

She dropped her hand as if stung.

“Is it your intention to deny the Lord of Light?” she asked angrily. “We risk losing this battle for the dawn if you choose to turn your back on him. Please reconsider your rash decision before it’s too late”.

Jon shook his head.

“I admire your devotion to your god, Lady Melisandre...I truly do”, he replied. “But I don’t believe that your god is responsible for this dragon”.

She narrowed her eyes as the corners of her mouth drooped in protest.

“This dragon was birthed many years ago, the progeny of one of the mighty Targaryen dragons that roamed across Westeros”, he continued. “And I suspect...no, I believe...that this dragon was awakened by the Old Gods in the hour of our greatest need. It is a child of the north, my lady...it has been nurtured by the warm, sulphuric waters that wind their way through an underground system of springs and rivers that extend throughout the north. Winterfell is its home...and I have it on good faith that it will soon return. So, please...extend my good wishes to your red god...but there will be no sacrifice made for a gift that was never his to give”.

She straightened her shoulders, her red eyes flashing, and she turned to take her leave without saying another word. Jon feared that he had angered her to the point of no return by repudiating the actions of her god so bluntly but he was tired of playing along.

She brushed off all attempts to accompany her back to the surface.

“I don’t need you to show me the way, Jon Snow”, she said. “Mayhaps this would be a fine time to reconsider...while you’re waiting for this dragon of yours to return. I sincerely hope it won’t be a long wait...winter is already upon us”.

When Jon emerged from the crypt, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the brighter light, he crossed over the yard and stopped when he thought he heard someone call his name. He looked around but could only see the usual hurly burly of activity and none was attempting to get his attention. He raised his face to the sky, feeling the fading sun wash all over him. He pricked up his ears, trying to tune out the noise all around him and focus on the one sound that he sought above all others.

“You’ll get a crick in your neck if you stand there too long looking gormless”, said Val.

Jon swiveled his head in her direction. She and Arya appeared to have returned from their afternoon’s ride, scouting, as it were, the surrounding countryside for signs of the impending invasion. Steam poured from the horses’ nostrils and Jon was uncomfortably aware that the temperature was dropping rapidly. Arya shivered lightly as she dismounted.

“We’d better stable the horses as soon as possible before they catch a chill”, she said as she grabbed the reins. Val nodded and followed suit.
“What’s wrong?” she asked when she caught sight of the worried expression on Jon’s face.

“Everything”, he replied.
Chapter 18

Darkness was falling earlier with each passing day. Today the sun struggled to rise just as they finished breaking their fast and then sank below the horizon just after the midday meal. And, so far, the moon had yet to show its face. The obsidian arrowheads clinked softly as Val shifted the quiver on her back and leaned against the parapet, resting her arms on the ancient stones as she gazed into the black shadows that surrounded them. She flexed her fingers to keep them from stiffening from the cold then probed the newly formed calluses for any lingering signs of tenderness. As she pressed the pads of each finger on her left hand, she mentally tallied up her losses…her father, her grandmother, her mother, her first husband, her sister. She had buried each and every one of them deep inside of her so that she could carry them with her always. Life will always triumph over death, she thought, as long as we continue to love those who have been taken from us.

She listened to the flurry of sounds below her as the other inhabitants of Winterfell made preparations for the long night ahead. Heavy stones were being lifted up in buckets on pulleys to be piled up next to the murder holes. The portcullis groaned in protest as it was lowered to the ground, likely for the last time tonight. Soon everything would be in its place and they would wait…and watch…and listen. Jon had said that listening was key when you could no longer trust your eyes to tell you the truth…when your eyes strained to make sense of the darkness. We have become old hands at this already, she thought, flattening herself against the wall as several barrels of hot pitch thundered past her amidst shouts of “make way, make way”.

Gradually the din died down until there was only the dull murmur of voices accompanied by the sound of the blacksmith’s hammer striking the anvil with a steady rhythm. The fire in the forge burned almost constantly, day and night, a reminder that the production of the means to wage war continued apace.

Val turned to her face to the sky and was gratified to find that at least some of the stars were now visible. She traced a line from one to another, reciting the name of the constellation she had learned as a child at her grandmother’s knee…the Fisher. The story of the Fisher was one the most common legends that had been passed down amongst her people. Nobody knew the origins of the Fisher, other than he came from a place where it was winter all the time. The people of this place knew of summer, that it existed elsewhere in the world, but they had never experienced it firsthand. It was known that a man, with cold blue eyes, somewhere further north, had chanced upon some small birds, his “summer birds”, he called them, and that he tied them up in bundles and kept them with him at all times. It was believed that as long as he held these birds that summer could never come. So the people began enquiring as to where they could find this man so that the birds could be freed and winter’s grip could finally be loosened. At last, the man was discovered, hiding in a cave near the edge of a fast-moving river. And so the Fisher, alone, took it upon himself to undergo this journey to banish the cold. When he found and confronted the man they struggled savagely until the Fisher was able to push the man on to the icy river. The ice cracked instantly and the man slid beneath the cold grey open water. Then the Fisher unbundled the birds, crying out with happiness as they took to the sky to reclaim their freedom. But his feelings of elation were short lived. Before he could make his escape he was beset once more by the man who had emerged from the water after fighting against the raging current and managing to drag himself back to shore. After a brief struggle, the man shrugged off his bow and fired arrow after arrow upon the Fisher who leapt towards the sky, flying after the birds in order to save himself. The man fired a arrow after arrow but only succeeded in wounding the Fisher’s left heel, causing him to dangle his leg slightly like a broken tail. To this day the man continues to chase the Fisher across the firmament, the hunter chasing his prey for all eternity.
She heard the click of his boots and the low tenor of his voice before he reached her side. Then he silently pressed a small, spongy package, wrapped in embroidered linen, into her hand.

“Sansa sends her regards”, whispered Jon.

Val grinned with delight as she unwrapped the gift and broke off a piece, proffering it to him first. He shook his head.

“I have had more than my fill”, he said.

She stuffed the morsel into her mouth, savouring the sweet, tangy taste before it slipped down her throat. Lemon cakes had already become her favourite confection to be found in this brave new world and her good-sister was more than happy to share them with her during her nightly vigils on the wall.

This was Val’s third shift in five days. She had fought to take her place on the wall alongside the others, despite Jon’s misgivings. Truthfully, she knew nobody was terribly comfortable with having a pregnant woman taking her place in the front lines but she couldn’t see herself hiding in the keep with those who were incapable of doing battle. She knew her skill with the bow would be useful in the war to come so she refused to bow to pressure from Jon to remain safely inside the castle walls.

“I refuse to cower in the larder with the rest of them,” she snapped.

Jon tried several different approaches to try and change her mind but nothing was working. She steadfastly ignored the appealing tilt of his head and the plea for reason in his dark grey eyes.

“That puppy dog look is not going to work on me this time, Jon Snow…I’m taking my turn like the rest of them”, she replied stubbornly. “This is my home, now, and I have every right to defend it”.

She softened when she saw the look of dismay on his face lapse into sullenness. She grabbed his hands.

“When I get too big I promise you that I’ll tend to the wounds, pass out water…anything to be useful”, she reassured him. “But at this moment, now that I’m feeling better…stronger… I need to do my bit…and I need to face the enemy head on”.

She coaxed him into bed to make amends. She knew that the future looked bleak and that they both needed to take what little pleasure life allowed them. His lips laid a trail of kisses beginning with the hollow of her neck, passing between her swollen breasts and stopping when he reached her belly. He laid a hand across her abdomen, detecting a soft roundness that he hadn’t noticed before. He knew she had spoken of having to let out the seams of her dresses and replace the laces of her breeches with longer ones. But now there was tangible evidence of the baby that was growing inside of her.

“Have you…have you felt any movement yet?” he asked shyly.

She looked down at him and smiled as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“Only the feeling of soft butterfly wings beating”, she said. “Gilly reckons the babe is still very tiny…no bigger than a hen’s egg”.

He bestowed a gentle kiss on her skin before reaching down to part her legs. She sighed with contentment as she nestled back amongst the pillows, prepared to let Jon’s skillful tongue make her forget all her worries.

Their enemies were kind enough to send them a warning when they were about to attack. On the
first night a cold, penetrating mist rose up from the snow and crept through the trees like a ghostly apparition. Tendrils of white mist floated towards them, swirling and licking at the outer walls. Then a kind of hush fell over the land as the trees ceased their stirring and the birds fell mute. It felt like everything and everyone were holding their collective breath.

They looked like small pinpricks of bright blue light, bobbing up and down in the dense fog. Then vague shadows appeared, gradually taking more human form as they drew closer. When the mist appeared to part, fear clutched at Val’s heart when she saw the enemy for the first time in all its clarity. Tormund stood next to her, his jaw dropping at the sight.

“This is an abomination…a mockery of life”, he sputtered as he watched the dead advance upon the living, frozen grins on their faces and putrefying flesh hanging from their bones.

Aye, thought Val, tis a madness for sure as her eyes passed over the horizon looking for signs of the Others while wondering what kind of creatures would use the bodies of their dead enemies to carry out their own dark intentions.

The inhabitants of Winterfell slashed and burned the wights for hours that night, watching the bodies pile up against the gates and then reduced to sooty ashes in the snow. The living triumphed that night. But Jon and Val both knew that victory would be short-lived.

“Let them celebrate for now”, muttered Jon as they listened to chorus of cheers and weeping. “It’s a release from the tension that is sorely needed”.

They began anew at first light to assess the damage and make repairs. And then they hunkered down for what was to become the second of many harrowing nights to come.

On the night of the third assault, the Others finally appeared. As the freezing mist began to lift, Jon caught a glimpse of the white, wraithlike generals on their rotting steeds. They remained seated at a safe distance, impassively watching the melee as it ensued…watching their troops throw themselves at the fortified gates with bone-crunching abandon or attempt to scale the walls on the piles of burned and broken bodies of those who had already tried and failed.

“There’s no lack of soldiers to raise for their army”, he said to Val as he directed her attention to the Others. “But they’ll soon realize that overwhelming force may not be enough. Winterfell has stood firm for over a thousand years, enduring many an onslaught from all comers”.

Val nodded in understanding as she watched the Others closely. She realized that the puppets will continue to just kick at the doors unless the puppeteers are prepared to step up their skills at pulling the strings. In time they can wear us down but that may be too long in terms of the ambitions of the Others.

“They’re learning”, said Jon ominously when the wights appeared on the fourth night wielding fallen trees to use as battering rams.

Tonight was still clear but there was a heaviness to the air…a sense of foreboding that hung over everyone. Jon had moved on, his mission complete as far as Val was concerned, so she had refocused her attentions on any sign of movement beyond the walls. She jumped when she felt a hand land on her shoulder and turned to discover Satin standing behind her.

“How goes it then?” he asked pleasantly.

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“It’s your turn tonight, is it?” she asked.
He startled and tried to look as if her question confounded him but then it was clear by the expression on her face that the jig was up.

“Sorry…he made it clear that I was to stay by your side at all times”, he said after clearing his throat.

Val sighed and turned back to scanning the horizon.

Her first night on the wall she was accompanied by Jon who hovered and clucked over her like a mother hen. Even after making it clear that his attentions were both unwarranted and unwanted, he still refused to leave her side. The second night he sent out Arya as his proxy. But, at least Arya had the good grace to blend into the background, not making it obvious that she was there to protect Val. It never failed to amaze Val how chameleon-like Arya could be. Whether she was in the company of highborn, lowborn or free folk, Arya was able to seamlessly blend in…tailoring her language, her gestures and sometimes her appearance so that she faded away into the crowd.

“Bind her breasts and dress her in leggings she could pass as a man if she had to”, observed Val one day as she watched Arya swagger from the yard after trouncing a male opponent in the practice yard. She had even paused in the midst of the battle to spit and fondle the nonexistent balls between her legs before resuming her attack.

Having Satin by her side was no burden either. He was a comfortable companion, willing to exchange idle gossip while they both shuffled their feet to keep the rising damp at bay. She probed him for a few scraps of information about his latest conquest, a young man from the Hornspit Mountain Clan. So far, Satin confessed, they had only shared a few chaste kisses. The boy was clearly nervous about going any further.

“He’s only ever been with girls”, whispered Satin. “Mebbe if I don a dress he might find me more enticing”.

Val smothered a laugh and shook her head, conjuring up a mental picture of Satin dressed in one of Sansa’s fine gowns. He’d turn more than a few heads if he did…and not out of disgust. Satin was already a very pretty man.

Their smiles and easy banter ceased when they felt the icy cold descend on them like a frozen blanket. They exchanged anxious looks before staring at the heavy grey fog that rolled towards them.

Val pulled her scarf up around her nose and tried to steady her breathing. The wool quickly became hot and soggy with each burst of breath until she felt like she was on the verge of suffocation. Her ears sang as her blood raced through her veins. Then, just as she was reaching down to gather up more arrows she heard a whirring noise followed by a grunt as Satin slumped against her.

She was confused at first and made to push him off until she saw the arrow sticking out of his chest, just below his left shoulder. His eyes were glassy and his breathing was shallow. She screamed for help, struggling to make her voice heard above the roar of battle, just as another volley of arrows flew out of the swirling fog. Most of them hit the castle walls and bounced off into the snow but couple of them made it over the top and landed on the stones with a clatter.

Two men and a woman came to her aid. One of the men immediately wrenched the arrow out and watched in horror as blood gushed from the open wound. The woman swatted him away while Val tore off her scarf and pressed it against the bloody gash.

“You dolt”, snarled the woman. She beckoned to the second man to help her carry Satin down the walkway of the ramparts just as another arrow struck a nearby wooden beam.
“Don’t you fret, love”, said the woman. “We’ll find somebody to tend to him”.

Val nodded and wished them godspeed. They carried Satin off with heads lowered and knees bent, twisting to avoid the arrows which were now getting closer to finding another victim. She rose up and fired off a few fiery arrows of her own to provide some cover, silently willing them to find their mark in the void of the freezing mist.

She knelt down to peer through the loopholes and refocused her attention on determining where the arrows were coming from. The fog had never been this heavy before, nor had it ever moved like this before...as if it was billowing off the open seas. The intense cold made her lungs hurt with every mouthful of air. The snot pouring from her nose had frozen into two little crystal bells that tinkled as she craned her neck to make sense of the shadows below. As she swiped at her nose she became aware of something large brushing up against her backside and then she felt Ghost’s hot breath on her cheek. Jon, she knew, would be close behind.

Jon was still barking out orders when he crouched down beside her.

“Sam’s looking after him”, he said quietly.

She nodded. Jon missed very little when in command of the battlements. He missed even less where his former Night’s Watch brothers were concerned.

The fog had begun to thin and a patch of sky appeared through a gap in the gloom. She tugged on Jon’s sleeve when she spotted the anomaly.

“One of the stars is moving”, she said as she pointed to the Fisher. The constellation was out of alignment as one of the stars appeared to have broken away from the others. It was moving rapidly towards the earth, a falling star hurtling towards its death. Val pulled back, inexplicably saddened at the thought, until Jon nudged her.

“That is not a star”, he said.

She redirected her eyes to the loophole once again and sucked in breath, holding it for a second or two until slowing letting it out. Then she turned to Jon.

“The dragon has returned”, she whispered just as another volley of arrows arced over their heads.

An uneasy silence settled over the castle and for the first time in hours the pounding sound of the tree trunks being rammed against the gates did not serve as a background to the heat of battle. The quiet was unsettling as everyone paused to watch in awe and fear as the enormous pale creature descended from the black sky unleashing short bursts of fire upon their enemy. Within seconds many wights were balls of flame writhing on the ground. Several more lurched out of the mist and tumbled over each other, trying to get out of its path until the dragon spat out more fire, engulfing them before they crumpled into the snow.

The living stood on the battlements watching the dragon warily as it circled menacingly overhead. Jon scrambled to his feet and held out his hand to Val.

“No”, he shouted as some of the archers reached for their arrows. “Do not loose unless I say so”.

As she rose up, Val could read the skepticism on the faces of those closest to her but they held their tongues and stilled their hands.

The dragon circled three more times before abruptly shifting direction, banking slightly and finally disappearing over the treetops. By then grey was breaking from the black just over the horizon. Val,
feeling relieved that the long night was finally over, collected her gear and stretched lazily up to the sky. Then she smiled to the sun which was just beginning to share its light.

Jon was already organizing the collection of wights, ensuring that they were burned until they were reduced to ashes. Charred bodies were being stacked outside the walls and set ablaze by those wielding torches while scouts set off on horses to search the nearby smouldering woods for more dead. The horses were a bit skittish, the smell of so much burned rotting flesh making them nervous.

As the dead burned, a debate ensued about the dragon. It was merely defending its home, some argued…so how long would it be before it turned on us?

“Now don’t turn into a bunch of nattering nancy boys”, roared Tormund, fixing his eyes upon them. “We have to continue keeping trust in Jon…that the dragon truly means us no harm. And until I’m proven wrong I will stand firm… and I expect the rest of you to stand with me”.

There were a few grumblings and mutterings amongst the gathered throng but most nodded their heads in agreement…for the nonce.

She found Jon near the stables saddling his horse. Arya was already seated on her horse which was pawing the ground impatiently, much like its mistress, Val suspected. He leaned in to give her a kiss.

“We’re off to try and find the dragon”, he said. “Do you wish to come?”

She felt tired, deflated and heavy. She shook her head.

“I need…I need to check in on Satin”, she replied. “And then I need my bed”.

He promised to bring her news upon his return and rode off with Arya close on his heels.

After Sam reassured her that the arrow had hit nothing vital and after Satin offered her a few groggy, incoherent words before falling back to sleep, she dragged herself off to bed.

She had expected Jon to awaken her but it was Sansa’s sweet voice she heard first in her dreams, imploring her to wake up.

“Come, Val…come and see”, said Sansa.

Val slowly opened her eyes and wiped away the drool that gathered at the corner of her mouth. A lit candle sat on the bedside table while Sansa perched on the edge of the bed itself. She was holding Val’s dressing gown.

“Quickly now…you must come and see”, she repeated.

Val sat up and leaned on one elbow, dimly aware of the sounds of a commotion going on outside. After rising, she wordlessly donned the gown and allowed Sansa to take her hand. She led Val through the torchlit corridors until they reached the entrance to one of the lesser used towers. They climbed the twisting stairs, careful not bump their heads on the low, slanted ceiling as they neared the top. Then Sansa strode ahead into the tiny room at the apex of the tower and threw open the shutters, allowing a blast of cold air to clear away any cobwebs that may have lingered. Then she turned to Val with a triumphant smile upon her lips and beckoned her to take a look.

Val’s mouth fell open when she surveyed the scene. The people on the battlements were cheering as fire spewed from the dragon’s snout. As the wights caught fire, they briefly performed a grotesque dance before twisting to the ground. The dragon made several passes, diving down from above the trees before leveling out and blasting the undead soldiers with no show of mercy. When the dragon
flew close enough to the open window, Val could make out the dark figure of a man riding on the
dragon’s back, clutching at its scaly neck. His identity was hidden in the shadows until a blast of fire
lit up his face into high relief. But it didn’t matter…Val already knew.

Jon, thought Val, you did it…you’re riding a great, bloody dragon. And as long as you don’t fall off
and break your neck then this could be the turning point in this whole, pointless war.

After dressing, she and Sansa joined the others outside, witnesses to a spectacle never seen before in
living memory…a dragon laying waste to enemy combatants. The dragon skidded as it landed on the
snow. Jon sat on its back for a few more seconds before sliding off. He was trudging towards the
open gate as the dragon let out a loud screech, flapping its leathery wings as it rose into the sky and
soared off in the direction of the pale wintery moon.

Arya was the first to greet him.

“What was it like?” she asked eagerly.

He wiped away the soot and sweat from his brow.

“Hot”, he replied tersely.

His expression softened when he saw the frustration etched on her face.

“And exhilarating”, he added. “Please, Arya…I promise to tell you more once I’ve had a bath and a
bit of a rest”.

She pouted briefly before whirling aside to let him pass.

He threw his arms around Val when she greeted him. Despite the frigid temperatures he still felt hot,
almost feverish to the touch. She frowned as she laid the back of her hand against his forehead.

“I’m not ailing”, he growled.

“I’m allowed to make a fuss”, she replied. “If only to return the favour of you fussing over me for
these past few moons”.

He buried his face in her hair, seeking a respite for a minute or two from the attentions of those who
had either witnessed his feat or had heard whispers of what had occurred.

“You’re everyone’s hero now”, she whispered as she gently pushed him away. Then she linked arms
with him, deftly maneuvering him out of the crowd of backslappers and those who simply wished to
shake his hand.

Over a cold supper, he told her how he, Arya and Ghost tracked the dragon to a cave approximately
two leagues away to the west.

“It is warmed by the same underground sulphur springs that run beneath Winterfell”, he explained.
“It’s no wonder it has adopted it as its new home. The walls are lined with similar crystal formations
and the floor is already littered with the bones of its prey”.

Warging the dragon was no simple feat but at least it wasn’t the first time. Mounting it, however, was
a different kettle of fish.

“It wasn’t…pleased”, he said cautiously.

Val tilted her head, her brows knit together in concern.
“Just how pissed off was it then?” she asked.

Jon uttered a deep sigh before responding.

“Very”, he replied.

As Sansa had already pointed out, the act of riding a dragon turned out to be more difficult than simply breaking a wild horse. It resisted Jon’s first initial attempts to climb on its back, bucking and roaring as Jon desperately tried to hang on. The dragon melted the snow around the entrance to the cave and set more than a few trees on fire. But Jon refused to let go. Gradually, the dragon grudgingly grew to accept this strange bipedal creature who invaded its consciousness and tried to gain control over its most basic instincts. And so the process of melding man and beast into a tool of war had begun.

“I sent Arya and Ghost back to Winterfell almost immediately”, he said. “She wasn’t well pleased with me but I shut down all her arguments for staying…it simply wasn’t safe”.

After a few trial flights, during which Jon sheepishly admitted that he fell off more than once into the deep, pillowy snow, he and the dragon flew back to Winterfell. The castle was already under siege and it didn’t take much urge from Jon to set fire to the invaders. The wights were dispatched with relative ease but the Others were immune to the effects of fire. This served to confirm what had already been revealed by Sam and other ancient lore.

“And where is the beast now?” she asked. “Can you summon it at will?”

He reached out to stroke Ghost’s back, his hand lingering in the direwolf’s white fur.

“There’s a connection now…like me and Ghost”, he cryptically. “The dragon has become part of me…and I have become part of it”.

How strong that connection was proved when the dragon returned couple of hours later. It flew lazy arcs over Winterfell until Jon exited the front gate. Then it landed gracefully and folded its wings, allowing Jon to throw some furs over its back before climbing aboard.

“I expect we will return before sundown”, he said, leaning forward with his hands braced against the dragon’s neck. “I need to get a sense of the size of the forces we’re up against”.

His face said it all when he returned. The man who had conquered a dragon only hours earlier looked utterly defeated when he returned. The dragon lingered after Jon dismounted, hungrily eyeing the pigs in their pens. Sansa noticed and quietly gave orders to have one of the squealing creatures delivered to the dragon. She presumed, most likely correctly, that a hungry dragon wouldn’t differentiate between a domesticated animal and a small child if the opportunity presented itself. We must ensure that it is well-fed as long as it is needed, she determined.

“They’re everywhere”, said Jon, scanning the horizon gloomily. “Karhold is overrun…Last Hearth is just holding out. More and more of the undead are marching south along the kingsroad…almost as far as the Neck. I tried…I tried to burn as many as I could…but there were so many”.

As his voice trailed off, Sansa found herself focusing on the sound of the pig screeching as the dragon breathed fire on it before snatching it up in its maw. She winced as she heard the bones crunch between the dragon’s terrible sharp teeth.

“How many, Jon?” she asked sharply.

“Too many, Sansa”, he replied. “One dragon won’t be enough to save all of Westeros…maybe not
even enough to save Winterfell”.
Chapter 19

To say that disappointment was writ large on her face was an overstatement. But Jon noticed the slight flare of her nostrils and the muscles working in her jaw as if she was biting down hard on some sarcastic words. She kicked at one of the chairs before pulling it out with her foot and lowered herself upon its seat, stretching out her long legs before her and clapping her hands behind her head. She was the picture of insouciance but Jon could sense the anger simmering just below her placid exterior as she inclined her head towards Lord Manderly.

“I want to thank you my lord for your generosity”, she said with a tight, cordial smile. “The amount of coin you bestowed upon us will keep my men in whores and drink for hours…perhaps days if I allow it. But we must return to the sea as soon as this meeting is over…the ice is encroaching on the shores and the warmer waters are beckoning”.

Manderly’s smile was equally forced.

“I’m pleased to offer your crew our hospitality”, he said as he dipped his head slightly, “although it is on the understanding that they will refrain from raping and pillaging while enjoying what the pleasure houses have to offer”.

She raised her eyebrows dramatically and heaved a deep sigh.

“I’ll cut to the chase then, shall I…why have you summoned me here?” she asked.

Manderly and Jon exchanged glances before Jon answered her question.

“We need ships”, he said bluntly.

Asha tilted her head and regarded him with a cool curiosity.

“For what purpose?” she asked.

“To transport thousands of men and horses across the Narrow Sea from Meereen to White Harbour”, replied Jon.

Asha sat in silence for a minute, chewing on her lower lip, before lowering her arms and pushing against the table’s edge as she rose to her feet.

“You’re both fucking mad”, she said. “What you’re proposing is nothing less than treason”.

Jon leaned forward and grabbed her wrist before she could twist away from him.

“Hear us out first”, he said softly.

She shook off his hand and stood swaying slightly, gripping the back of her chair. Her eyes strayed to a corner of the ceiling, clearly ruminating over whether to leave or not before slowly sitting down again and folding her arms across her chest, a mutinous look displayed upon her face.

“Why?” she asked.

“You know why”, replied Jon. “You’ve taken your fair share of refugees across the waters away from these shores…you’ve no doubt heard the tales. So let’s not pretend that you don’t know what’s happening further north of here”.

Manderly leaned forward to add his two penn’orth.

“She’s coming, my dear”, he said gently. “It’s simply a matter of time. But, unfortunately, time is not on our side...so we need her to come sooner than later.”

Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them before she leaned back in her chair.

“How many?” she asked curtly.

Jon hesitated before replying.

“Fifty to sixty ships should be enough to persuade her that we’re serious”, he said. “This is in addition to the ships already being supplied by Lord Manderly and...others who wish to remain anonymous at this juncture”.

Asha swore under her breath.

“I don’t have that many ships under my command”, she said flatly.

Manderly chuckled lightly, causing his chins to waggle, and flashed a genial smile.

“Yes, we know. But we also know that you are well acquainted with many others who operate just beyond the reach of the law”, he said. “We are confident that you could use your powers of persuasion to cast their lot with you in this little venture”.

Asha narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“It’s going to take more than just honeyed words and a glimpse of my tits to get that lot of villains to throw in with you”, she retorted.

“I agree, my lady...money speaks volumes”, replied Manderly. “We’ll ensure that you are supplied with ample coin...enough to secure their services”.

Jon could see her shoulders relax slightly but the hardened look on her face remained firm.

“And what of me?” she asked. “What do I get out of this for all my troubles?”

She knew...it was obvious to Jon when she entered the room. And now he was prepared to make the offer.

“Your brother”, replied Jon.

Her eyes darted to Jon’s face and he could see her lower lip tremble slightly.

“Aye”, she said, her voice cracking, “and when would that be exactly?”

“Once the queen’s army has been safely delivered to the shores of Westeros then I will release Theon to your custody”.

He could see her mulling over his words, looking for means to sweeten the offer. He decided it was time to seal the deal.

“I know you’re an ambitious woman”, he said. “But even with your brother by your side do you seriously believe the two of you have the means to wrest control of the Iron Islands from your uncle’s hands?”
He could see the seeds of doubt beginning to take root.

“Daenerys Targaryen is looking for allies”, he continued. “If you throw your support behind her now then I have no doubt that she’ll back up your ambitions to take back control of your homeland”.

She sank lower into her chair and leaned back, then raised her eyes toward the ceiling in contemplation. The two men shifted in their seats and waited patiently for her to reach a decision.

After a few minutes she lowered her arms and slapped her thighs.

“Fuck, yeah”, she said after exhaling slowly. “Let’s do it”.

They all shook hands and Manderly ordered glasses of his finest brandy to be served. Jon watched Asha swirl the amber liquid in her glass before taking a sip, closing her eyes as it slipped down her throat.

“My lady”, said Jon. “I need to speak to your navigator most urgently. Do you know where I can find him?”

She opened her eyes and regarded him with curiosity.

“He’s most likely in the arms of his favourite whore just now”, she replied. “Can it wait? He’s been ordered to return to the ship at six bells so you’re more than welcome to speak to him then”.

“No”, replied Jon.

Asha shrugged and gave him the name of the whorehouse where he most likely could find her navigator. Manderly gave him directions and offered him the guidance and protection of a couple of his men.

“It can be rather unsavoury at the best of times”, he warned.

The guards led Jon past the Seal Gate, through the Fishfoot Yard, and down a couple of narrow twisting passageways until they reached the site of an ancient bathhouse. After descending a set of worn stone steps, they passed through a doorway and were ushered inside a dim, dank antechamber reeking of ale and boiled cabbage. Jon could hear shrieks of laughter and the splash of water echoing nearby. While one of the men spoke to an old crone with rouged cheeks the other stood glowering by Jon’s side, watching a parade of sailors and other patrons sidle past with partially dressed women on their arms. The conversation ended abruptly when the old woman twitched aside a worn, patched curtain and disappeared behind it.

“Believe it or not this is one of the better stews in town”, commented one of the guards drily.

They tried to remain unobtrusive until the woman returned with a short, disheveled man whose unkempt hair was plastered to his broad forehead. He looked decidedly irritated at being disturbed, tying up the laces of his breeches with quick, jerky motions.

After a short introduction, Jon turned to his companions and asked them to remain a short distance away while he bid the navigator to join him at a small table in a dim corner of the room. Before sitting down, he ordered ale for himself, his two companions and the navigator. As he lowered himself onto the chair, he pulled out a weathered map from beneath his jerkin. After unfolding it gently and spreading it across the table, he then placed a forefinger on the dot representing White Harbour.

“I’m planning on crossing the Narrow Sea from here to Meereen”, he began. “What is the simplest
method of finding my way there on my own?’

The man peered at Jon for a couple of seconds, momentarily perplexed. Then he reached out to smooth out the folds of the map further and anchored it with the flat of his hand.

“Tis risky to go it alone but you can always use the stars to find your way”, the navigator said. “Your best bet is to set off after dark and use the star, Sirius, as your guide. But beware on a clear night ‘cause the sky is filled with countless stars. And if you chance to lose sight of yours then it’s far too easy to go off course”.

Then the man reached into a back pocket and pulled out a round metal object and laid it on the map.

“And you’ll need a compass”, he added. “Even if the gods show you no mercy with no land in sight, no moon and no stars then at least the compass will always show which way is east. Once land is within your sights then it shouldn’t difficult to follow the coastline until you reach your destination”.

Then he placed a grubby finger on the map, tracing a route from the Free Cities along the shores of Slaver’s Bay and listing off the landmarks Jon should seek as guideposts to the ancient walled city of Meereen. Jon heeded his words carefully, storing them away for later. When the navigator finished he leaned against the back of his chair and folded his arms across his chest. Jon could see the man was waiting to be dismissed so he could use what precious time he had remaining to further indulge in the delights of the pleasure house.

Jon lifted the edges of the map and folded it up carefully. Then he thanked the man for his advice and the gift of the compass before placing a few coins on the table before him. The navigator blinked rapidly before scooping up the money. Then he saluted Jon with a grin as he rose to his feet.

“Many thanks, ser”, said the man, jingling the coins before pocketing them. “This should be enough to keep the girls happy a little while longer”.

He thrust out a gnarled hand.

“Got yourself a nice little ketch, have ya?” he said cheerfully as the two shook hands. “Well, may she always remain true and never yaw”.

As they climbed the stairs, Jon looked up at the darkening sky. He searched for Orion’s belt but the line of rooftops partially obscured his vision of the celestial majesty unfurling above him.

Not for the first time Jon was thankful for the two men who walked silently by his side. White Harbour reeked of desperation these days. Jon’s kept one hand of the pommel of his sword while his companions cast a watchful eye over the darkest corners as they navigated their way through the narrow streets.

The moon was rising behind the Merman’s Court as they approached it. As he parted company with his companions, Jon was grateful that they asked no questions, merely wishing him a safe journey.

He moved quickly through the corridors until he reached the guest room where he had been staying. He retrieved the satchel which had been stashed in the bottom of the wardrobe. Then he donned his warmest cloak and pulled on his heaviest gloves before yanking open the heavy door and heading towards the sounds of merriment emanating from the great hall.

As he entered he made a beeline towards the dais where Manderly, with Asha seated to his left, was consuming one of many courses that would no doubt be served during evening meal.

“Jon, my boy”, bellowed Manderly when he caught sight of him, “come join us”.
Jon shook his head as he approached the table which should have been groaning under the weight of food that was arrayed before him.

“If it please you, my lord, I’d sooner not tarry”, said Jon. “I don’t know how long this journey will take, nor what obstacles I might encounter along the way”.

Manderly nodded.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asked.

“Aye”, replied Jon.

“Stop by the kitchen on your way out...have them prepare you a parcel of food to take with you”, instructed Manderly. “And the boy’s name is Erik...he is to be trusted”.

As Jon turned on his heels to leave, he was aware that Asha was watching him closely, her curiosity clearly piqued. But Jon wasn’t about to slake her interest just now...he knew she’d hear the tales soon enough.

As he entered the stables he called out for Erik but there was no reply. Jon waved his torch about carefully, nudging open several stalls until he found an adolescent boy, wrapped up in a moth-eaten blanket and curled up asleep on a bed of straw. Jon squatted down and shook the boy’s arm until his eyes drifted open.

“Get up”, said Jon. “It’s time”.

The boy wiped away the sleep from his eyes and scrambled to his feet.

“The horses are saddled already, ser”, said Erik as he led Jon to the rear of the stable. When they reached the two horses, Erik handed the reins to the sleek, black hunter while he held on to the reins to a brown, shaggy garron.

They mounted their horses after leaving the stable and headed towards the godswood where Jon and Val had exchanged vows many moons before. Jon dismounted first and handed the reins over to Erik. As Jon pulled off the furs and satchel, he quietly told the boy to take the horses to the edge of the clearing. Then he glanced at the sky.

It shimmered in the dark sky, almost like one of the thousands of stars that spread themselves across the firmament. The beating of its wings grew louder as it dipped lower towards the godswood and it might have been mistaken for a large bird of prey until it opened its maw and a burst of flame shot out. Erik let out a strangled cry and then raised an arm, a finger pointing at the creature that slid on to the ground, sending up a spray of snow.

The horses nickered and whinnied nervously as the dragon swiveled in their direction. Its red eyes bulged from their sockets and its tongue darted out its snout, tasting the smell of fear wafting from the horses. Jon took control before the dragon could indulge its basest desires.

Erik found his voice just as Jon was rearranging the furs on the dragon’s back.

“I thought they were all dead and gone from the world”, said the boy.

“Aye”, said Jon as he looped a length of rope around the dragon’s neck, “as did we all...and yet, here it is...standing before you larger than life”.

Erik swallowed and back away a few steps as the dragon pawed at the ground impatiently, its talons
leaving deep ruts in the snow. Jon finished tying off the rope and then waited for the dragon to lower itself so he could climb aboard the scaly creature.

“I need you to pass me the satchel”, he said, stretching out a hand.

The boy took a few hesitant steps forward and reached down to pick up the satchel. His eyes never left the dragon’s as he passed up the bag to Jon. The dragon rose up once Jon slung the satchel over his shoulders and drew the hood of his cloak over his head.

“Are you a Targaryen?” blurted out Erik.

Jon laughed and leaned forward to stroke the dragon’s neck.

“No, just another northern bastard”, he replied.

The dragon took three steps backwards before lifting itself off the ground. Jon clung to the rope around its neck trying to find his balance. He had already spent countless hours on the dragon’s back but he could never quite overcome the sensation that, without a second’s notice, the creature could shake him off and leave him lying on the ground with a broken neck.

Jon watched Erik and the horses fade into the shadows as they rose higher into the sky. The wind was whistling past his ears as he steered the dragon towards the harbour and out over the open water. The cold was penetrating, exacerbated by the pounding of the cold waves below. The moon cast its glow over the grey seas and Jon took advantage of the light by flicking open the compass and checking that they were heading directly east. After a few course corrections he felt confident that they were heading in the right direction. He located the Dog Star, Sirius, glowing the distance next to Orion’s Belt, its colours alternately flickering between white and blue, and kept it firmly in his sight.

At times, one or two seabirds floated on the wind beside them. Jon regarded them as a bit of diversion until the dragon began to give chase as the birds banked off sharply and dove towards the water. He pulled on the rope with all his strength, digging his heels into the dragon’s flanks as he attempted to regain control. But the dragon’s instincts drove it lower and lower until they were mere meters of ditching into the sea. Jon could feel his throat begin to close as he struggled to push down his rising panic. In his own bid for survival, he slipped under the skin of the dragon. Within seconds he quieted the creature’s lizard brain and forced it to level out, skipping over the waves until it began to climb once more into the sky.

After a few more course corrections, Jon was aware that they must be nearing the continent of Essos when he could feel warmer air caressing his cheeks. Soon enough sweat began to trickle down his back and chest, soaking his shirt. He threw back his hood and tugged at his collar to allow some air to waft around his neck. His fingers prickled under his heavy gloves but he didn’t dare remove for fear of losing his grip on the rope.

When he finally spied the dark, dim outline of a land mass below, he held the compass up into the moonlight once more. Then he confirmed the position of Sirius before taking a deep breath and nudging the dragon towards the ground, praying to all the gods that it wasn’t simply an uncharted island in the middle of nowhere.

It was still pitch black when he guided the dragon into a clearing. As he removed the furs from the dragon’s hide, he listened to the courtship songs of thousands of cicadas with other nocturnal creatures joining in the chorus. The air was heavy with the scent of evening primrose and moon flowers dotted the edge of small pool of black water, their snow white petals reaching towards the night sky.
The dragon snorted and dragged its long claws through the deep grass. Then it lowered itself to the ground, tucking its scaly head under one wing as it eyes shuttered closed.

While the dragon rested, Jon tossed off his furs, leathers and boots before wading into the pool of water. He removed the rest of his clothing and wrung them out before tossing them on the bank. Then he scooped up some sand and scrubbed his scalp. His hands still felt warm as they swept across the surface of the water but his feet felt cool with each step into the soft, muddy bottom that squished up between his toes. When the water was up to his shoulders, he turned and slid beneath the surface. He swam for a few minutes, stretching out his arms and legs to relieve the tightness in his muscles. When he resurfaced, he sucked in a lungful of air and then slid on to his back. He closed his eyes and listened to the water lapping around his ears, conjuring up a vision of Val, her long blonde hair cascading over her creamy shoulders and her body heavy with child, to enhance the pleasure of this moment.

When he began to shiver lightly he waded back to the bank, grabbed his soggy clothes and hung them from the low hanging branches of the willows that bent over the water. After donning a change of smallclothes and wolfing down a pasty filled with savoury mutton, he gathered up his furs, spread them out under the trees and willed himself to sleep.

He was jolted awake when he heard the screams.

The sounds of roaring and hissing, punctuated by the cries of a child and the bleating of sheep, made Jon sit bolt upright. He was momentarily disoriented after being woken out of a deep sleep. He threw back his furs and grabbed his breeches, almost losing his balance as he struggled to shove his legs into them. Then he sprinted towards the clearing, only slowing down when he realized what was unfolding before him.

A flock of sheep, their bells tinkling as they ran, was fleeing into the nearby bush followed by a small boy who was shouting and crying as he chased after them. But that is not what held Jon’s attention. Instead he was diverted by the two beasts that remained in the clearing. His own dragon, pale as milk and the smaller of the two, was tearing into the charred and dismembered remains of a sheep while the bigger dragon, black as pitch with red horns and even redder eyes, was circling around it ominously. Oily, sooty smoke blew from the black dragon’s nostrils as it swiveled and cast its bulbous eyes on Jon. The eyes narrowed as it opened its mouth, displaying an impressive array of sharp teeth. Jon recoiled in fear and backed away slowly. The black dragon drew closer, its nostrils flaring. Jon could see the fire building in the back of its throat and he immediately turned to make a frantic charge for the water.

His heart was pounding in his chest as he made a shallow dive into the pool. He could hear muffled roars above his head and the hiss of embers falling into the water. He held his breath until he felt his lungs were about to burst. When he broke through the surface of the water to take another gulp of air an arc of yellow fire shot over his head. The air was thick with smoke and he coughed violently before slipping below the surface once again. He kicked and swam underwater a little further before resurfacing. He peered through the thick haze. To his left the light appeared to be brighter and he thought the smoke might be starting to thin. He crawled up on the bank, coughing and vomiting, and threw himself upon the grass. He waved off the smoke that drifted around his head and listened intently for a few seconds. He could still hear the bells of the sheep off in the distance and the frightened sobs of the boy. But the dragons were strangely silent and he wondered if one or both of them might be dead.

He rose up and stumbled through a wall of smoke, until he finally emerged into the clearing once more. He glanced around, noting the blackened stumps, the small fires still burning and the scattered bones of the dead sheep. A loud shriek split the air above his head and he looked up to discover his
own dragon very much alive and flying lazy arcs overhead. It gracefully descended from the sky and landed a few meters away with a thud. Then it threw back its head and roared in triumph.

“Good dragon”, said Jon hoarsely, laying his head against the dragon’s side. “You held your ground and sent it packing”.

His fingers probed the singed areas on the creature’s haunches, checking for burnt flesh and open sores. When he was satisfied that the dragon had suffered no serious injuries, Jon finished dressing and quickly ate most of his remaining food. Once he had bundled up the rest of his belongings he mounted the dragon to continue his journey.

When they rose above the treetops, he searched the sky for the coastline, determined to follow it in his quest for the landmarks that would guide them to Meereen. He checked his compass and the position of the sun before angling the dragon southwest towards the shore.

The birds were not companionable during this leg of the journey. Jon could see them flying off in the distance, soaring on the warm breezes that blew from the south. As the sun beat down on his face, Jon listened to the waves crashing on the beaches and glanced with envy at the seabirds below as they bobbed up and down on the clear, blue waters. Every once in a while a cloud would drift past the sun, blocking out its rays and offering Jon some relief. Already he could feel his cheeks reddening while his shirt clung to his torso.

When a black shadow passed over his head, for a split second Jon believed it to be yet another cloud, hopefully one that might be carrying rain. He lifted his face to check and felt his heart lurch. The black dragon was flying mere meters overhead, its legs stiff and poised, its talons fully extended. It let out a deafening screech as it suddenly banked inland. And then his own dragon let out a loud response and began to pursue it.

“No”, yelled Jon as he struggled to control his beast.

He jerked on the rope and tried to steer the creature back towards the shore but it continued to chase the black dragon.

We’re cooked, thought Jon, as the black dragon abruptly shifted direction. It was bigger, stronger and now it was closing in on them from behind, chasing their tails and filling the air with its sulphurous breath.

Jon was on the verge of debating chucking himself into the sea or trying to navigate evasive maneuvers when a sense of calm settled over him. By now the black dragon had rounded his flank and he could see it out of the corner of his eye. He found himself calling out to it and the black dragon responded with a dull roar. They were now flying together, side by side, their leathery wings flapping and soaring in unison. Suddenly it dawned on Jon that in his moment of panic he had warged his dragon...and it was clear they must now let the black dragon take the lead.

He might have dismissed this notion as a moment of madness if it weren’t for the realization that this must surely be one of Daenerys’ dragons. But as they flew further inland over unknown plains and mountains, Jon still couldn’t set aside the worry that the dragon might be leading them astray. On the other hand, he reasoned, a dragon need not bother following the coast. It was not a ship, or a sea creature…it was free to fly at will. But until they approached the waters of what appeared to be Slaver’s Bay, he was finally able to relax a bit more, trying gamely to banish that last niggling bit of doubt that had remained in his gut.

They never reached Meereen. Instead the black dragon began to drop in altitude just as they passed over a barren hilltop not long past the foul, cursed city of Mantarys. Jon looked sharply towards the
He looked for a safe spot to land as the black dragon turned towards a larger, more elaborate temporary dwelling. A tent suitable for a monarch on the march, thought Jon. The sentries posted along the hills ringing the valley were already signaling to each other, alerting the others to his presence and he knew that time was of the essence. Archers were gathering below, waiting for orders to fire. For a few seconds Jon thought about turning around and returning later once the sun had gone down. Perhaps I should arrive alone and on foot under cover of darkness, he thought. But then he squared his shoulders and sat up straight. No…no…I am not an enemy combatant….I am an emissary of one of the former seven kingdoms, here to negotiate an agreement with their queen. I can still be persuasive and non-threatening despite the presence of my dragon.

He boldly aimed for an area on the edge of the plain, not far from Daenerys’ tent. So far, so good…the archers had not fired upon him. The dragon sent up a cloud of dust as it landed in the dirt. But within seconds they were surrounded by spear-wielding armoured soldiers and burnished warriors leaning from their horses, glowering at him. Jon looked around and noted that they still gave him and the dragon a wide berth. I still have a chance, he calculated, so he composed his face and held up one hand as a sign of peace and respect.

“I have travelled from the west with an urgent request to meet with your queen”, he said loudly.

They continued to stare at him in silence. The horses shuffled nervously as the dragon snorted and dragged its talons through the dirt. Then Jon could see some of the soldiers begin to make way for somebody moving forward from the rear of the crowd.

“They can’t understand you”, said a familiar voice. “They don’t speak the Common Tongue”.

Jon peered into the crowd in frustration, waiting for the man to appear.

Two of soldiers straightened their spears and parted as a small man pushed them past them. Jon might have been hard pressed to recognize the ravaged face after so many years but this man was the most famous dwarf in all of Westeros…and those mismatched eyes and shock of blonde hair were still intact and unmistakable.

“Tyrion Lannister”, said Jon, his voice palpable with relief.

“Jon Snow”, replied the little man warmly, holding out a hand. “Please tell me you haven’t deserted the Night’s Watch. I wouldn’t want to have you executed”.
Chapter 20

“I must confess I never expected to see you again, Jon Snow”, said Tyrion as the two men shook hands.

“Nor I you, my lord”, replied Jon with a little laugh.

“Well…truth be told, a kinslayer on the run has to learn to avoid any connections with the past for fear of being turned in”, said Tyrion ruefully.

Jon murmured some words in sympathy but Tyrion waved them away before gesturing towards the pale creature that was now disappearing over the horizon.

“Before we get down to business we need to address the elephant in the room”, said Tyrion, “or rather…the dragon in our midst. Our queen will be most jealous since she was under the impression that her dragons were the last of their kind in the known world. And yet, unless I have been indulging in too much fine wine, I just witnessed another fine specimen, indeed, of the genus draconem. Might I ask how a son of Ned Stark, a most honourable yet, let’s be realistic here, unremarkable man, arrived in Essos on the back of a dragon?”

Jon’s inclination towards self-deprecation meant that he tried to offer an abbreviated version of the events that led up to the discovery of the dragon. But Tyrion kept interrupting the narrative, insisting on more details as the story unfolded. When Jon finally finished, Tyrion stood silent. Then he pressed a couple of fingers to his left temple and closed his eyes.

“So let me get this straight…you were elected Lord Commander; you brought the wildlings through the Wall; some of your men revolted and tried to kill you; Stannis’s widow tried to have you sacrificed to raise her husband from the dead but you escaped; you took back your family home with the aid of your sister; you travelled to Skagos to bring back your brother; you married a wildling princess; the Wall fell and the grumpkins and snarks poured across the border; and then you found a dragon living beneath the crypts of Winterfell”, he said in a monotone voice.

His eyes popped open.

“Have I forgotten anything?” he asked.

Jon shook his head, a bemused expression on his face.

“Well”, said the little man as he rubbed his hands together. “I’m not sure I would have believed such an extraordinary tale if they hadn’t come from your lips. No offense, Jon Snow, but you never struck me as a young man with much imagination. Nevertheless, we need to the heart of the matter…specifically why you are here with an urgent request to meet with Her Grace. You see, as a son of one of the usurper’s dogs she will not look upon you favourably so I fear your request for an audience may be denied”.

Jon leaned forward, lowering his head to meet Tyrion’s eyes.

“The grumpkins and snarks”, he said softly but clearly, “have raised an army from the dead and are laying siege to the north while more are advancing on The Neck. Conventional weaponry is next to useless in defeating them. We need… “

“What are grumpkins and snarks?” interrupted a woman, her voice coming from behind his back. “I am not familiar with these words”.

He reckoned she barely reached his shoulder. Daenerys Targaryen wore a blue diaphanous gown shot with silver thread that emphasized her violet eyes and silvery hair. The silver bangles that adorned her forearms clinked as she folded her arms across her chest. As she spoke, Jon could see her studying him closely, taking in all details of his dress and mannerisms.

“Who are you?” she asked.

A quick glance at Tyrion’s face prompted Jon to drop to one knee.

“I’m Jon Snow, Your Grace”, he said, his head bowed.

A tall, older man with white hair and a lined face, who was standing at her shoulder, leaned over to speak in her ear.

“Ned Stark’s bastard son”, said the man in a low voice.

Jon looked up to see her visibly stiffen and bright spots of red were forming on her cheeks. He opened his mouth to offer some words in his defence when Tyrion cut him off.

“No, Your Grace…we discussed this when you took me on as your counselor”, he stammered. “The sins of the father should have no bearing upon his children…for that would be unjust…and you…you are not an unjust ruler”.

Her nostrils flared and her mouth tightened. She glared at Jon for a few seconds, drumming her fingers on her arm. Then she took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Come”, she said curtly, looking at Tyrion. “Bring him to my tent. He may have a few minutes of my time”.

Jon scrambled to his feet and fell in line behind Daenerys and her advisors while two of her soldiers brought up the rear, the tips of their spears resting against his lower back.

It was stifling hot in her tent. Jon raised an arm and drew his sleeve across his dripping forehead before lifting the satchel off his shoulder and laying it to rest at his feet on the dusty floor. Daenerys sat immobile before him with Tyrion flanking one shoulder while the older man stood quietly by her other side. He had taken Longclaw from Jon when they entered the tent. His eyes lit up when he discovered the sword to be made of Valyrian steel. He slid his fingertips next to the sharp blade, assessing the workmanship, before laying it on a nearby table. While Jon waited awkwardly for his opportunity to speak, Daenerys conferred quietly with a what appeared to be her handmaiden. After a minute’s consultation, the girl bowed and stood off to one side.

Daenerys settled back into her chair and nodded at Jon.

“You may speak”, she said.

He reached down to retrieve his satchel and began to pull out the gifts that had been created for her. The first was a lovely amethyst and diamond pendant silver necklace from materials produced from northern mines and commissioned by Sansa.

“Make sure to tell her the amethyst matches her eyes”, Sansa had instructed him.

Jon caught a flicker of interest pass over Tyrion’s face at the mention of Sansa’s name.

The second gift was a fine woolen scarf in the Targaryen colours of red and black.
“She’s going to need that when she gets here…it’s been really fucking cold lately”, said Val. The extreme cold was causing chilblains and she had taken to rubbing witch hazel on the patches of discoloured swollen and itchy skin.

The third gift was a small knife carved out of the bone of an aurochs. The handle had been fashioned into the head of a dragon with Jon’s dragon serving as the model. It had been commissioned by Val and wholeheartedly approved by Arya.

“A woman can never have too many weapons”, said Arya ominously.

Daenerys examined each gift before passing them off to her handmaiden. Only the knife raised a ghost of a smile upon her lips.

Then Jon launched into a carefully rehearsed speech, composed and vetted by Manderly, full of soft, flowery words designed to further flatter the young monarch. But he could see by the bored disdain on her face that his words were falling on deaf ears.

“Your Grace”, he said when she saw her signal the guards. “Please…I’ll get to the point”.

Her hand faltered. Then she nodded to the guards to stand down.

He watched Tyrion lean over to whisper a few words in her ear. Then he gave Jon a look of encouragement.

He carried on in blunt, unvarnished terms of the dire situation facing the north, finishing off with an impassioned plea to join her forces with theirs. Then he armed her with the promise of enough ships, in addition to the ones she had already secured, to bring her army across the Narrow Sea with the full support of the northern houses. Then he waited for her response.

She sat watching him, seemingly unmoved. He listened to her fingers drumming on the arm of her chair and searched his words wondering what he could have said to upset her.

“And why should I accept the word of a man whose father participated in the destruction of my family’s house?” she said, finally breaking her silence. “Why should I accept the word of the son of the man who was responsible for the sack of Kings Landing and the murder of my good sister and my brother’s children?”

She raised her eyebrows to emphasize her point. Tyrion made a small, exasperated sound in the back of his throat and leaned over her shoulder.

“If it please Your Grace”, he said, “may I remind you that it was my father, may he rest in all seven hells, who opened the doors to the city and ordered the murder of your brother’s family…not Ned Stark”.

The older man laid a fatherly hand on her other shoulder.

“And may I, too, remind Your Grace, that it was Ned Stark who resigned his post as Hand of the King rather than issue the order to have Your Grace assassinated when word arrived that you were carrying the Khal’s child”, he said gently.

She heaved a deep sigh. Her fingers had ceased their drumming.

“Thank you, Lord Tyrion”, she said with a nod. “And thank, you Ser Barristan…I stand corrected”.

Jon shifted his attention to the older man with renewed interest. Barristan Selmy was a living legend
who many thought was dead or gone to ground. He wondered briefly how the great elderly warrior had come to be one of the queen’s closest advisors.

She twisted her head to address Tyrion.

“You have prior history with this man…should I trust him?” she asked.

Tyrion glanced at Jon before replying.

“I first met him at Winterfell when he was still a boy. I accompanied him to Castle Black where we became fast friends. We even danced together, if I remember correctly”, said Tyrion. “You can trust him, Your Grace. He is smart, loyal and, no doubt, just as honour bound as his late, lamented father. And believe me when I say that he’s not the type to go about spouting fanciful nonsense”.

Barristan cleared his throat.

“Your Grace”, he said, “wouldn’t it be better to arrive on the shores of Westeros as a saviour rather than a conqueror? If you dispatch these enemies charging down from beyond the Wall with all haste then the people of Westeros are bound to open up their hearts to you forever”.

Daenerys plucked at her gown.

“Well”, she said, “I admit that is preferable to being despised and feared”.

She clasped her hands together and laid them in her lap.

“That will be all, Jon Snow”, she said. “I will give you my answer in the morning”.

Jon was somewhat stunned as he was ushered from the tent. He stood alone outside brooding. This wasn’t exactly how he envisioned it playing out. He watched her army practice their maneuvers with great precision and listened to the horsemen shout at each other in guttural tones. He had rarely felt so completely out of his element before. He wasn’t sure what more he could have said to persuade her to come and was still hoping that her decision would be in their favour. Time was awasting and he longed to return to the north posthaste.

He had just thrown his satchel down in frustration next to the pile of his other belongings when he felt a light touch on his elbow.

“Don’t be discouraged, Jon…come with me”, he said as steered him towards another tent nearby, smaller and less grand than the queen’s.

Tyrion pushed aside the flap and gestured to Jon to enter.

“Welcome to my little piece of home”, said Tyrion.

The tent was done up in the Lannister colours. The cot was large and comfortable looking with a soft feather mattress and plump, scarlet pillows trimmed with gold. Books were piled on the dusty floor and several bottles of wine adorned a small sideboard bearing the Lannister sigil of a golden lion rampant on a crimson field. While Tyrion poured wine into two golden flagons, Jon perched on a chair with stunted legs and upholstered in a red and gold striped fabric. Tyrion passed Jon one cup before settling into the matching chair and raising his cup high.

“To the future”, he said. “May it be filled with good wine, soft beds and willing women”.

Jon laughed and shook his head before taking a sip. It was extraordinarily good wine, much better
than anything he had ever tasted before. Before long Tyrion had refilled his cup for the third time and Jon was starting to feel pleasantly pickled.

“Tit for tat, Tyrion”, said Jon. “I’ve filled you in on the events of my life since we parted so now it’s your turn”.

“That”, replied Tyrion, “is going to take considerably more wine”.

He was struggling to remove the cork from the bottle when the tent flap was pulled aside. Jon could smell her perfume before she entered.

“Your Grace”, he stammered as he rose to his feet. He started to incline his head when she told him to stop. He grabbed a vacant chair and offered it to her. She accepted, leaving him standing wavering, uncertain about what to do next.

“Sit down, Jon Snow”, she murmured as she examined an empty wine goblet. “We don’t stand on ceremony in Lord Tyrion’s little patch of Casterly Rock”.

She held out the goblet to Tyrion who filled it with wine. She took a delicate sip before wrinkling her nose and setting the cup down.

“Too strong for you?” asked Tyrion with a wink at Jon.

She gave Tyrion a withering look before taking up the cup and gulping down some more, finishing it off with a light gasp.

“He does enjoy goading me”, she said. “But if it wasn’t for him we’d still be stuck in Meereen”.

Tyrion chuckled and stared into his cup.

“I only suggested what was necessary”, he said. “But to my credit, you did choose to heed my advice in the end”.

She turned to Jon.

“I’ve come to inform you that I have made a decision”, she said. “As soon as I have transferred proxy authority over to Ser Barristan, I and the dragons will be crossing over the Narrow Sea to Winterfell”.

She looked at Tyrion.

“And you will be coming with me”, she added.

Tyrion almost choked on his wine.

“Me?” he squeaked. “I’ve never flown further than the coast before…I…I really don’t believe I’m up to the task of flying several hundred kilometers over churning seas and snowy terrain”.

While Tyrion shivered at the thought, Jon looked at him in astonishment.

“You didn’t tell me you’ve flown on a dragon, too”, said Jon.

Tyrion took another drink of wine.

“We didn’t get that far in the tale of my sorry life so far”, he mumbled into his cup.
Daenerys reached out and gently took the cup from Tyrion’s hands and set it just out of reach.

“He can get maudlin if he’s had too much to drink”, she said.

Then she stood up and smoothed down the skirt of her gown.

“I expect the pair of you to join me in the mess for the evening meal”, she said. “I will be making an announcement to the assembled captains regarding our change in plans”.

She turned and paused for a second, holding the flap open.

“Clear heads, gentlemen”, she said.

Tyrion made a face after she had departed and leaned over to retrieve his cup He held it up to his lips and downed the contents in one long, continuous drink. Then he stood up, swaying slightly on wobbly legs.

“Come along, Jon”, he said with an exaggerated wave of his hand. “Now it’s time for you to meet my dragon”.

As they wound their way through the maze of tents, Tyrion would stop off periodically to speak to some of the soldiers who gathered in small groups to cook and share the evening meal. He chatted amiably in low Valyrian to the men, cracking bawdy jokes, which were often received with blank stares.

“The Unsullied are famous for their unparalleled battle skills and unflagging discipline”, said Tyrion as they moved on. “But they never understand my silly japes”.

“Why are they called the Unsullied?” asked Jon.

Tyrion looked uncomfortable.

“Well…er…it’s because their master had their twigs and berries were removed when they were very young”, he explained.

Jon shook his head.

“A eunuch army”, murmured Jon.

He marveled at the lengths to which masters would go to keep and maintain discipline. The Night’s Watch took a less extreme route…at least you only had to swear off women. But most of the time they didn’t bother to enforce that part of their oaths. And they certainly didn’t chop off your family jewels just to seal the deal.

They made their way to an open area where several men were cooking meat over open pits of flames. Tyrion took in a deep breath and rubbed his hands together.

“Lamb for supper”, he said in evident delight.

He waddled over to one of the butchers severing a leg at a bloodied table. He pointed at the bucket sitting by the butcher’s feet. It was filled with skin, bone and other scraps of discarded meat. The man nodded and Tyrion picked up the bucket and hefted it towards Jon.

“It’s a bit heavy”, he huffed. “Would you mind?”

Jon took the bucket from him and waved away the flies. Then he followed Tyrion to a fenced off
area where sheep and goats grazed on some patchy vegetation, watched over by a couple of swarthy men. Tyrion exchanged a few words with the men before all three of them raised their eyes to the skies. They silently watched a few clouds scudding past the sun when one of the men lifted a finger and pointed off to the west.

Four dark shadows appeared, silhouetted against the sun. They grew in shape and size as they drew closer to the ground. The dragons had returned.

“Snack time”, said Tyrion as he reached into the bucket and pulled out some rejected meat and tossed it into the air. The black and red dragon cooked it with a blast of fire and snatched it up between its jaws. The fence bulged as the penned-up animals beat a path to the furthest corner of the pen, bleating piteously at the sight of the predatory beasts.

The cream and gold coloured dragon squabbled with bronze and green coloured dragon over some singed meat while Jon’s dragon hovered overhead, new to this game. Tyrion gave Jon their names and told him which one was his to ride.

“Viserion”, he said, dragging out the syllables with great relish.

“Does the queen ride all of them?” asked Jon.

Tyrion shook his head tossed in some more meat.

“No, only Drogon”, he replied, watching the black dragon roar at its siblings, warning them away from a larger piece of coiled intestine. That left the green dragon without a rider.

Tyrion glanced at Jon’s dragon. It was guarding some half-charred bits of meat while snarling and snapping at the others. He made a comment about it being a “scrappy creature” and expressed surprise when Jon informed him that the white and red dragon did not yet have a name.

“But you named your wolf”, exclaimed Tyrion. “Does your dragon not deserve to know that it has an identity and a place within your world?”

Tyrion tossed another scrap towards the dragons. This time Rhaegal managed to muscle in between the other three, scorching the bit of skin and muscle before gobbling it up.

“Your dragon, Jon, has already done yeoman’s service for your people”, he said as he stared into the empty bucket. He upended it and wiped his hands on his breeches. “Its deeds need to exist separately from the other dragons. Give it the respect it deserves…give it a name, Jon”.

Jon was lost in thought as he watched his dragon take to the sky. He had never given much consideration to bestowing a name on the creature. Even his own child, once born, will remain nameless until he or she reaches the age of two if Val has her way. But he would heed Tyrion’s words and give it some thought.

The evening meal beneath the starlit sky was a show of contrasts. The Unsullied unit commanders were quiet and respectful while the Dothraki were raucous and boastful. Jon was seated to Daenerys’ right as an honoured guest. More than once during the meal he wondered how she managed to combine such disparate groups of warriors into an effective fighting force. He had his answer when she finally rose to address them. She only had to clap her hands once and a hush fell over them. They listened to her in rapt attention as she explained their change in plans. She communicated to them by alternating between Valyrian and Dothraki with complete and utter ease. She was charismatic and messianic and they clearly worshiped her.

When she had sat down again Jon noticed that while the Unsullied resumed their meal, the Dothraki
captains leaned over the table to confer with each other, looking slightly ill at ease. They were speaking in uncharacteristically hushed tones. Tyrion, who was seated next to Jon, leaned forward to speak to the queen.

“They are still concerned about crossing the poisoned water, Your Grace”, said Tyrion as he gestured towards the Dothraki.

“I am well aware of their feelings on the matter, Lord Tyrion”, she snapped. “They will just have to adjust to their new reality”.

Tyrion pursed his lips and withdrew from pursuing the matter further. Clearly this was an issue that had been discussed many times before.

Jon leaned over to speak quietly in Tyrion’s ear.

“Have they been preparing for the invasion?” he asked. “Do they know what to expect?”

Tyrion took a drink of wine and continued to stare straight ahead. Some of the Dothraki were shaking their heads, occasionally glancing at the queen. Tyrion turned back to Jon.

“The initial plan was to land in a remote part of Dorne”, he explained. “The climate there is not that dissimilar to Essos. Then we would march north to Kings Landing, taking it by force with the aid of the dragons”.

Jon took in a deep breath.

“So that is why she wasn’t prepared to make a decision immediately”, said Jon after letting out his breath slowly. “I guess my coming threw a monkey wrench into her invasion plans”.

Tyrion looked into his empty cup and reached for the bottle of wine.

“If we can deal with the Others using only the dragons then she might be able to go ahead with her initial plans”, he said before taking a sip.

He had a faraway look in his eyes as he gazed over the assemble commanders.

“Not one of them has ever experienced a northern Westerosi winter”, he said. “I’ve never experienced a northern Westerosi winter. So…if we can avoid putting the troops on the ground at White Harbour t’would be best all round”.

He shook his head and sighed. Then he slapped the table with both hands.

“But I’m not a military strategist”, he said.

He peered around and looked at Barristan who was deep in conversation with the queen. No doubt discussing contingency plans, thought Jon. The prospect of preparing several thousand warriors for battle in the harsh northern terrain during winter was daunting at the very least. Many had already tried…and many had already died.

After the meal had finished, Jon accompanied Tyrion back to his tent, leaving Daenerys and Barristan still huddled together. After a few minutes of drinking in the cooler night air, Tyrion broke the silence.

“Your sister, Sansa…how fares she?” asked Tyrion hesitantly.

Jon smiled to himself for a second.
“She fares well, thank you”, Jon replied.

After a few more steps Tyrion spoke again.

“Does she…does she ever speak of me?” asked Tyrion.

Jon could detect a tinge of anxiety in his voice.

“She does…she speaks very kindly of you indeed”, replied Jon.

That was a lie…Sansa spoke little of her life in Kings Landing and even less of her time in the Vale. Sansa kept her secrets very close to her chest…and one day Jon was determined to pry them out of her. He suspected some form of retribution was long overdue. But one thing he was sure of was that Tyrion Lannister was not one of the perpetrators of her closely held sorrows.

As they approached Tyrion’s tent, Jon could see a couple of women lurking in the shadows, giggling. The night had brought out the camp followers, looking for a bed and some companionship for the night. To Jon’s surprise even some of the Unsullied took women to their beds.

“Everyone needs to feel the touch of another human being, Jon”, said Tyrion. “It’s what keeps us sane”.

The women were eyeing Tyrion boldly as he greeted them warmly. He invited Jon to join them for the night, an offer which Jon respectfully declined.

“Missing your little wife, eh?” asked Tyrion as he slipped his arms the women’s hips.

Jon picked up his things, slinging the satchel over his shoulder and tucking the others under his arm.

“Aye”, replied, “I do. So I will bid you all a very good night. Do try and get some sleep, Tyrion”.

Tyrion glanced from one woman to the other.

“I expect these two lovely creatures and a couple of bottles of wine will no doubt exhaust me to the point of slumber”, he said.

Jon trudged through the camp looking for a likely spot to bed down for the night. Hundreds of campfires were burning, creating a hazy glow that spread out over the valley. He pulled out his compass and held it up to the light and gazed into the night sky. There it is, he said to himself…there is the star to point me home. The sight of Arcturus, pale orange and fluttering in the low air like a candle in the breeze, cheered him as it had long been considered by the northerners as a bellwether of spring.

When he found a likely spot, he spread out his furs on the hard packed ground. The night air was surprisingly cool so he collected some brush and built a small fire. As it sprang into life, he wrapped himself in his furs and curled up under the stars, letting the crackling and spitting of the flames lull him to sleep.

He awoke to the feeling of somebody, or something, nudging at his feet. When he opened his bleary eyes, he could see Daenerys looming over him.

“Get up, Jon Snow”, she said. “We’re getting ready to leave”.

He looked at her in confusion and pulled himself up until he was resting on one arm.

“What…now?” he asked.
“Yes…now”, she replied. “I was under the impression that time was of the essence…or did I get the wrong impression on that score?”

Jon fumbled for his things.

“No, no”, he replied hastily. “It’s just that I travelled here under cover of night so I could use the stars to navigate my way. I’m not sure if I can guide us back to Westeros safely without them”.

Daenerys straightened up as he threw back his furs and scrambled to his feet.

“You don’t need the stars in the heavens to guide you home, Jon Snow”, she said. “Your dragon is going to take you there. Once a dragon has made the journey it never loses its way again…so let yours be your guiding light”.

The dragons were already circling overhead as they readied themselves in the pre-dawn light. Daenerys, dressed in a soft woolen cloak with her head covered with her new scarf, had a few final words with Barristan before he aided her in mounting Drogon.

Rhaegal sent up a maelstrom of dust as it returned to the air first. It swooped over their heads, screeching its impatience for the others to join it.

Tyrion used his final minutes supervising the placement of a saddle on Viserion’s back, fussing over the straps so that they had just the right amount of slack and weren’t too tight.

“I can’t have Viserion tossing me into the sea because I rubbed it the wrong way”, he quipped.

He expressed surprise that Jon did not use a saddle.

“Well”, said Tyrion with a grunt as one of the Unsullied helped to lift him on to Viserion’s back. “That will have to change once we reach Winterfell. This is one of my designs, as is the one Her Grace uses. In the meantime, you mustn’t try anything foolhardy. We can’t afford to lose you, Jon…we have all agreed to follow your lead”.

“What is your dragon’s name, Jon Snow?” called out Daenerys as she looked over the white dragon.

Jon picked up the rope and stroked the dragon’s neck affectionately. Then he spoke the name that he had been mulling over since Tyrion had admonished him. You, my friend, are right, he thought…we need these dragons to help lead us out of the long night. And, in doing so, they will earn their place in history.

“Morningstar”, he replied.
Satin was awakened by the sound of small fists pounding on his door.

“Wait a tick”, he called out irritably as he fumbled with the flint.

As he lit the tallow candle, he silently cursed whoever was outside his door.

He shivered as he rose from the bed. The embers from the fire that had been burning so merrily a few hours beforehand now lay cold and dying. He could see his breath undulating in the flickering light of the candle.

He wrenched open the door to discover Rickon, one hand poised to lay another blow, his face glowing with excitement. A sidelong glance revealed Shireen standing furtively off to one side. She was normally a diffident child but at this moment she was grinning happily.

“Why is the pair of you still not abed?” growled Satin.

Rickon pointed towards the small narrow window where tiny beams of light poked through the cracks of the shutters.

“It’s nearly light out”, he replied. “Besides, you must come see the fire”.

“What fire?” asked Satin as he stepped back to retrieve his cloak.

“There’s an enormous fire burning to the northeast”, Shireen explained. “We saw it from the bridge”.

The world was hazy when they stepped out into the open air. Acrid smoke stung their eyes and beyond the ramparts, Satin could see orange and yellow flames licking at the low grey mist that stubbornly hung low over the snowy ground. The entirety of the Wolfswood appeared to be under threat. In the distance, he could hear the wolves calling to each other, their voices travelling easily in the frozen air. He knew that the pack must be racing through the brush, their eyes wide with fear and their teeth bared, zigzagging away from the unbearable heat that advanced upon them.

“What could have started it?” murmured Satin.

Shireen turned to him with a withering look upon her face.

“Dragons, silly”, she replied loftily.

The children skipped ahead, joining the men and women on watch who were clustered together along the ramparts, their weapons lowered or resting by their sides. But Satin’s eyes rested on a lone figure bundled in furs, standing on the bridge between the armoury and the Great Keep, gazing at the sky. Ghost lay by her side, appearing to be quite still at first glance. But when he lay his hand on the direwolf’s back to stroke his back he could feel him bristling.

“How many?” he asked after a minute’s silence.

“Four”, replied Val, keeping her eyes trained on the horizon.

Then she turned to Satin just in time to catch him stifling a yawn.

“I’m sorry that they woke you…I know you just came off watch”, she said.

Satin shrugged.
“Never you mind,” he replied. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world”.

The four dragons rose out of the flames, black silhouettes against the red rising sun. They were magnificent saurian creatures with their necks stretched long; their long legs draped behind them, talons extended; their wings spread wide, the length of several men. They called to each other, each cry distinctive in its own way, the sound carrying for miles before fading into the distance.

They winged towards Winterfell in a loose formation. As they drew closer, Satin could make out the vague forms straddling the dragons’ backs. He knew Jon’s shape intimately after watching him night after night guiding the dragon in a game of slash and burn. Then he recognized a woman’s form and that of a small…man?... Satin couldn’t be sure.

A cold breezed swirled across the snow as they dropped towards the fields that surrounded the castle walls. Morningstar was the first to land, beating its wings furiously as it stumbled at first upon landing and then steadied itself on the snow’s crusty surface. Jon slid off the dragon’s back and then strode purposively towards the small crowd that had gathered outside of Winterfell’s gates. As he pushed through the crowd of onlookers and well wishers his eyes were searching for the one face he longed to see more than any other.

“My love”, he cried when he found her and crushed her in his arms. He buried his face in her hair and whispered how much he had missed her.

“Ya daft beggar”, replied Val in a broken voice. “You haven’t been gone that long”.

She nuzzled his cheek, her hot breath tickling him. As they pulled apart he could see her eyes grow wide and her lips part wordlessly. Then she grabbed his right hand and thrust it beneath the waistband of her fur leggings.

“Feel”, she commanded him.

He looked confused.

“The baby”, she explained in exasperation, “he kicks”.

Jon paid no heed to the use of the male pronoun. At any given time Val would refer to the baby as a he or a she depending on her mood…which was changeable to say the least.

He stood by silently, the palm of his hand resting on her belly, waiting patiently to feel the movement that had her brimming with excitement. After a few seconds had passed she could see him begin to waver and furtively slide his hand upwards. She quickly turned to discover Sansa pushing her way through the crowd with Rickon firmly in hand and Arya close at her heels. She trapped Jon’s hand beneath her smallclothes before his fingers reached her waist.

“Your sister, Sansa”, she whispered as she pressed her forehead against his, “is every inch a lady but she is not a prude…now wait”.

He stared at his feet as his siblings swept past him. He could hear the murmurs of the crowd growing louder, intermingled with the screeches of the dragons as they soared and dove ever closer. He closed his eyes, trying to block out the world as he focused on feeling his child’s movements for the first time. Then he felt it…fleeting…no more than a ripple beneath her warm skin. A small gasp escaped his lips and she grinned as she patted his hand.

“There”, she said as she raised it and kissed his knuckles, “that was worth waiting for was it not?”

The noise of the crowd was reaching fever pitch and they both craned their necks to witness the
landing of the other dragons. Drogon and Viserion skittered across the snow, unused to the slippery surface while Rhaegal remained airborne, circling overhead. Satin helped Daenerys dismount while Tyrion was aided by a burly groom who lifted him off Viserion as if he was a small child.

The Starks presented themselves with Sansa curtseying gracefully before the young queen while Arya offered a shallow bow and then nudged Rickon to do the same. Sansa’s eyes flickered briefly upon Tyrion’s face and she offered him a curt nod before turning back to Daenerys.

“Welcome to the north, Your Grace”, said Sansa. “We are…we are very grateful that you have come”.

“Especially since you brought your dragons”, piped up Rickon.

This elicited a few guffaws from the crowd and a murderous look from Sansa for talking out of turn. Daenerys glanced at the child.

“And who might this young man be?” she asked.

Rickon bowed with a flourish.

“Rickon Stark, Your Grace”, he replied, “the lord of Winterfell”.

Daenerys’ eyes flickered with interest as she turned her attentions back to Sansa.

“Are not you, as the eldest surviving trueborn child of Eddard Stark, the lady of Winterfell?” she asked. “I was under the impression that you were the one in charge”.

Sansa flushed and looked more than a little flustered. Tyrion rallied to her rescue.

“Of course, Your Grace is aware of the Westerosi tradition of primogeniture in which the oldest trueborn male child…” he began until she raised a hand to indicate that he should stop.

“I’m well aware of such rules. However it doesn’t mean that I intend to deal with a young boy in weighty matters of statecraft, “replied Daenerys.

She bent down and reached out to ruffle Rickon’s hair.

“Run along now, child”, she said dismissively. “I need time to confer with your brother and sisters”.

Rickon scowled until Shireen appeared and grabbed his arm to pull him aside.

Accompanied by her growing entourage, Daenerys approached Jon, her eyes resting on Val’s face with an inquiring look.

“This is my wife, Val, Your Grace”, he said as he introduced the two women.

Val thrust out her hand immediately. She could see the hesitancy in Daenerys’ eyes followed by a sidelong glance at Jon before finally accepting the hand in a limp handshake. Then she turned back to Jon, her brows knit together.

“Val was raised amongst the Free Folk, Your Grace”, he hastily explained. “And the Free Folk do not kneel”.

Daenerys withdrew her hand and folded her arms, the expression on her face demanding further explanation.
“We follow strength, Your Grace”, said Val. “Prove to us that you can rid us of this scourge and we…all of us…will follow you to the edge of the world and back”.

A small smile crept over Daenerys’ lips and she inclined her head slightly.

“Then I trust I will earn your devotion and obedience in due course”, she murmured as she turned her head towards Sansa.

“Well…it has been a trying journey”, said Daenerys.

Sansa immediately picked up on the queen’s cue and ordered a young servant girl to accompany Daenerys to the chambers recently vacated by Sansa.

“They were my mother’s, Your Grace”, said Sansa. “They are the warmest and most hospitable rooms in the castle”.

She turned to Tyrion.

“I regret to say that I was not expecting you, my Lord”, she said. “So we have not prepared any rooms for your stay”.

Tyrion looked a little flustered.

“Well, I dare say you could put me almost anywhere…the nursery, the dog kennels”, he replied. “Even a corner of the kitchen would suffice as long as it is warm”.

Sansa’s chest rose and fell as she breathed in a deep sigh.

“While self-deprecation can be charming, it is totally unwarranted under these circumstances”, she responded drily. “You have come to us, the son of a great house, in mayhaps our hour of greatest need. Needless to say you shall be housed accordingly”.

She nodded at Satin.

“Please ensure that adequate space is prepared for Lord Lannister”, she said. “It might take a bit of gentle persuasion to encourage people to relocate to other quarters but our newly arrived guests have precedence above all others. Have I made myself clear on the matter?”

She arched her eyebrows to emphasize her point. Satin murmured “as you will, milady” before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

Once they were behind the stout walls of Winterfell, Jon could see that stragglers seeking asylum had continued to trickle in while he was away. There were tents and other odd makeshift dwellings packed together tightly. Some had even hollowed out mounds of snow and had burrowed beneath the frozen domes. Men stood in circles in front of their shelters talking amongst themselves while the women and children tended to the open fires. The snows had been falling steadily for a whole moon’s cycle and everyone should have been sleeping deeply and dreaming of the spring. Instead they waited, restless, their eyes and cheeks hollow with fatigue and worry, their nights stolen by the Others.

Jon excused himself to Val and quickened his pace in order to catch up with Sansa.

“Sansa, please reconsider my suggestion to reopen the crypts”, he said as he gently took hold of her arm.
Then he pointed towards the refugees with his free hand.

“They’re going to freeze out here in the open…the children are especially at risk”, he continued.

Her eyes betrayed a mixture of fear and guilt as she shook her head.

“Jon, you know that’s not possible…it’s too risky”, she replied.

When she tried to move away from him, he tightened his grip on her arm. She glared at him but he refused to let go.

“Then seal off the lower levels, particularly the ones where the floors have collapsed”, he said, the desperation rising in his voice. “And then empty out the tombs located on the remaining upper levels”.

She stared at him in surprise.

“And do what, exactly, with the remains?” she snapped. “That’s our father down there…my mother…how could you even harbour the notion that I would approve having their bones disturbed?”

He leaned in closer, his eyes boring into hers.

“Would you rather take the risk of having them resurrected into the army of the undead?” he asked, his tone dark and slightly menacing.

She shivered for a split second and turned pale. He could see she was about to reply when her attention shifted to somebody who had appeared at his shoulder.

“You could burn the bones and return the ashes to the tombs”, said Val as she reached out to uncurl Jon’s fingers from around his sister’s arm. “No harm, no foul and the Others would be hard pressed to find a use for such dusty leavings if it came to that”.

Sansa rubbed her arm.

“Mayhaps it could be done then…with all the attendant rituals…and all due respect”, she replied cautiously.

She glanced towards Arya who was deep in conversation with Daenerys and Tyrion before turning back to Jon and Val.

“I will have to clear this with Arya and…Rickon, of course”, she continued. “If they agree then we mayhaps we will go ahead”.

Jon lifted his eyes to the dull grey sky, the sun having disappeared shortly after rising. He could tell by the light that it would be not be back again today. The wind had already picked up and was sweeping the snow off the ramparts, swirling it around in a frenzied dance.

“Just…make it soon…please”, he replied.

She nodded and pulled up the collar of her cloak before turning to rejoin the others.

Val slipped a hand into Jon’s and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Don’t push her too hard”, she said. “She’s doing her level best but sometimes I’m afeared she might break”.
Jon squeezed her hand.

“I’ll back off when necessary…I’ve no desire to act the bully. But there are too many lives at stake to stand on ceremony. We’ve entered a darker world where many of the rules we were taught as children simply no longer apply…that they are just as apt to kill us as protect us”, he said. “If we survive this frozen holocaust, then many of the old conventions will have to die in order to create a new world order”.

The great hall was already packed when Jon and Val arrived, word having reached everyone’s ears that three more dragons, and two dragon riders, had arrived. The crowd jostled one another to catch a glimpse of the silver-haired queen and the queer-looking half-man that accompanied her. Whispers had floated around the room that the little man had once been Lady Sansa’s husband…and perhaps still was…so they were eager to get a closer look and get the full measure of him.

Tormund used his bulk and outsized personality to clear a path to the head of the line. Val found him endearingly awkward as the normally confident Tormund was demonstrably unsure as to the proper way to greet the young queen. In what must have been a hasty decision, he snatched up her right hand and bestowed a loud kiss upon it. Then he abruptly dropped it as if he had been scalded, blushing beet red when he heard the snickers coming from behind his back. Tormund spun around, his hands clenched and at the ready.

“Clear off the pair o’ you or ye’ll taste my fists”, he roared to a couple of young men who promptly slunk off, suitably cowed for the nonce in the face of Tormund’s wrath.

He redirected his attentions to Tyrion in short order, sinking low on his haunches so as to meet the Lannister lord eye to eye.

“I’m very pleased ta meet ye”, said Tormund thrusting out his hand.

Tyrion accepted Tormund’s proffered hand and winced as the larger man pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

“And I you”, replied Tyrion as he withdrew his hand, with some difficulty, from Tormund’s larger paw. Tyrion rubbed his hand with a slightly pained expression upon his face while Tormund stood up and continued to study the little man.

“Did nobody ever tell your father that it was unwise to steal a woman from his own clan?” Tormund finally blurted out.

Sansa looked aghast but Tyrion merely coughed and tried unsuccessfully to hide his amusement.

“One of my clan’s many failings, I’m afraid”, he said ruefully.

Tormund shook his hoary head with disbelief as Sansa shooed him away.

Daenerys’ speech to the assembled throng was full of fiery hope and optimism that the dragons would prevail in this war for domination. But while Jon knew that she was sincere in her desire to rid Westeros of this alien enemy from the far north, he also knew that her fiery rhetoric was designed to whip up support for her primary goal which was to secure the iron throne in her family name. As she spoke, he scanned the room for reactions which ranged from rapturous approval to thinly veiled skepticism. Many of the Free Folk exhibited a wait and see attitude…their folded arms and flinty eyes saying “show me…prove to me you are worthy of my devotion and self-sacrifice”. Val bumped shoulders with him to get his attention.

“She’s good…but she’s got her work cut out for her”, she said.
Jon nodded and leaned in closer.

“We’ve seen very little of them, so far, and I suspect we have yet to witness the full extent of their power. I just wish we knew why they are so bent on destroying us”.

Val threw up her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

“Promises must have been made… promises must have been broken. They’ve been pushing us out of our homes for nigh on twenty years or so. Mance knew the right of this, urging us further and further south before it was too late. But now, it’s not enough that we left. Now they’ve come to chase us down and trod us into the mud until all that’s left are empty, soulless shells to feed their army”.

After her brief speech, Daenerys demanded to see the cave where her dragons would be sheltering from the cold before darkness fell yet again. While Jon helped her and Tyrion on to the seat of the wagon, the swineherd loaded some snorting pigs into the back. There had been a subtle shift in wind direction and with it came the heavy scent of snow. Daenerys fussed with her furs while Tyrion pulled the hood of his cloak closer around his face, appearing to shrink as he huddled in between Jon and Daenerys. Once the pigs had been safely stowed aboard the wagon and the gate had been latched, Jon picked up the reins.

As they trundled through the woods the snow began to fall…fat, wet flakes that Jon hoped would blanket the Wolfswood and smother any lingering fires that still burned. While passing between some evergreens, he caught a flash of red through some thick tamarack. He pulled a halt to the horses and jumped from the footboard into the deep, drifted snow.

“This shouldn’t take long”, he said to his companions as he drew an arrow from the quiver on his back and crouched low. He kept his eyes trained on the creature as it padded stealthily along the rabbit runs.

“What are you hunting, Jon Snow?” asked Tyrion.

Jon nocked and let loose the arrow which struck its target before replying.

“A fox which has been raiding our rabbit snares”, he said as he waded through the snow towards the dying animal. As he bent down he could see that the fox’s eyes were already glassy and its hot blood dripped from its wound, congealing instantly as soon as it touched the crust of the snowpack. Jon yanked out the arrow before picking up the dead animal and throwing it onto the back of the wagon. The pigs were squealing in protest as Daenerys glanced over her shoulder at the dead fox.

“Do you mean to feed it to the dragons?” she asked.

Jon secured the gate and climbed back aboard the wagon.

“Aye”, he replied as he clicked his tongue to urge the horses to begin moving again.

“Does your dragon also eat the wights that it burns?” she suddenly asked.

Jon turned to her, his brow furrowed.

“No…so far it has only eaten freshly killed meat”, he replied.
Tyrion popped his head out from beneath his furs.

“Then mayhaps they should be encouraged to try human carrion”, he said with a backward glance at the pigs. “Food stores must be getting low and I, for one, do not want to be deprived of my ham and sausages while we are here”.

Jon chuckled in response.

“You’re right…it would be worth a try”, he said.

Once the dragons had been fed, Jon, Daenerys and Tryrion returned to the great hall where they were met by a warm meal and plenty of ale to go around.

“Drink up”, said Jon as he raised his flagon, “for once we’ve lost the light and the horns sound then the battle begins anew”.

He soon excused himself to find Val. He suspected, rightly so, that she was ensconced in Sansa’s solar with several other woman who gathered together to knit, weave and sew. He knew she had resisted Sansa’s initial invitation to join them a few moons back, fearing that she would be forced to sit among other highborn women with whom she felt little to nothing in common.

“Nay, it’s not like that at all”, said Gilly. She patted Val’s swelling belly. “There’s all sorts of womenfolk who come…even some men, truth be told. We sew and chat about all manner of things…it’s not just hoity-toity matters. Besides, you’re going to need some clothing for the wee one once he comes so why not get some help from the others. Some of the women are dab hands when it comes to knitting and I expect they’d be more than pleased to make you some baby jumpers”.

She looked up from her sewing when he entered the solar.

“Is it dark already?” she asked anxiously.

He shook his head and bent low to kiss her brow. Ghost lay by her side. Ever since the dragon had come into their lives Ghost had shifted his allegiance more to Val which was unsurprising to Jon. He suspected the direwolf took his cue from Jon himself, subconsciously taking over the protection of his wife and unborn child while Jon focused on honing his skills with Morningstar in order to wage war, night after night, until the break of dawn.

“Get some sleep, then, while you can”, she said, laying a hand upon his cheek.

When she returned to their room, Jon was gone but the sheets were still warm. She shivered when she heard the horns trumpeting the return of their nightly foes. As Ghost settled down before the fireplace, she crawled beneath the furs and drew them up under her chin. She lay quivering on her back as she listened to the urgent cries and shouts outside the walls. When will this ever end, she asked herself before rolling over on to her side and sliding into sleep.

She awoke in the middle of the night, her bladder reminding her that it was time to be emptied. She could have used the bedpan within arm’s reach but she preferred the luxury of the privy down the hall. While padding back to her room after relieving herself, she spotted a dark figure stretched out along the floor in a generally disused corridor. She adjusted her eyesight and thrust the candle out in front of her, waving it about to make sure that what she saw wasn’t just a trick of the light. Then she approached the snoring figure and touched it lightly with the toe of her slipper. The sleeping man sputtered and rolled on to his back before opening his eyes. Val bent down, trying to be careful about not letting wax drip on him.

“What are you doing sleeping out here?” she asked.
Satin rubbed his eyes and sat up.

“I had to give up my room to Lord Tyrion”, he said with a yawn. “And…well…there was nowhere else to bed down for the night…but at least I am close to the privy…”

Val held out a hand.

“Get up ya great berk”, she said. “You can sleep in our bed. Jon’s bound to be gone for a few hours yet so you might as well be comfortable and warm for a time”.

Satin shook his head.

“And what if he returns and finds me there?” he said. “He’ll not be well pleased to find I’ve taken his place in his nice, warm bed”.

Val rolled her eyes.

“Get over”, she said. “It’s a big bed and it won’t be the first time we’ve shared our furs with you. I’m not leaving you here to sleep on this cold, stone floor. If he comes back early then he’s bound to just crawl in beside you so don’t mither yourself…he’ll be fine”.

Jon returned a couple of hours before sunrise. As he quietly peeled off his clothes he noticed the bulge of somebody else in his place and knew it wasn’t Ghost that was curled up beside his wife. He almost threw a boot at the sleeping figure until Val roused herself just in time to tell him who it was. She pushed Satin to the edge of the mattress before lifting the covers to invite Jon to join her on the other side. As he settled beneath the furs, he muttered that she could explain later and was asleep within minutes, past the point of exhaustion and still stinking of sulphur.

A gentle knocking on the door awoke all three of them not much later. The old hinges groaned as Jon, scowling and bleary eyed, pulled open the door. Tyrion stood in the shadows still dressed in his fur cloak.

“I do apologize, Jon, but Her Grace sent me to inform you that she needs your help on a matter most urgent”, said Tyrion, wringing his hands.

Jon sagged against the door frame.

“Can it wait, my lord?” he said with a yawn. “I’ve only just got to bed”.

Tyrion continued to look contrite but shook his head.

“No, I’m afraid she is unwilling to wait”, he replied. “You see…one of her dragons has gone missing…the green one…Rhaegal”.

Chapter 22

Jon stood in the middle of a drifting nowhere, listening to the wind whistle past his ears. For a moment in the chill dusk, he lifted his eyes towards the west, watching the sky slip from peach, to garnet to blood. Morningstar startled him out of his reverie when it let out a loud groan as it dragged its tail back and forth, creating half-moon shadows in the snow. Jon reached out to pat the creature’s neck.

“It shouldn’t be much longer”, he murmured.

He could feel the ripple of the dragon’s muscles beneath its scaly skin as it lowered itself on to the frozen ground. He slid down next to the creature and huddled against it for warmth as he sensed the temperature beginning to dip in the waning light. He ran his tongue across his chapped lips, wishing yet again that he not forgotten the small container of honey mixed with rose water that Val had pressed upon him before leaving on the first day of the search for the missing dragon.

The rise and fall of the Morningstar’s breathing lulled him into a queer half-sleep. Three days of searching with no sign of the missing dragon, and with little chance to rest in between, had left him feeling alternately depleted and restless. He wanted nothing more than to go home. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with his wife and wrap his arms around her swollen belly.

But fatigue and frustration did nothing to deter Daenerys from insisting that someone or something had taken her dragon and she was not prepared to let them abandon their search until she had proof.

“My dragons would never stray that far or for so long”, she had declared vehemently. “A mother knows”.

She had caught the look that passed between Jon and Tyrion as soon as the words were uttered.

“Don’t think that I don’t know what you are both thinking”, she spat. “Mother of Madness is only the mildest of the many vile epithets that have not escaped my ears”.

Tyrion had opened his mouth to object to her conclusion with a soft-spoken “Your Grace” but she would have none of it.

“They are my children”, she retorted, “as surely as if I had carried them in my womb and held them to my breast to suckle at my teats. They are a gift from the gods. The night they were born, I should have died…I should have been burned alive with my dead husband and dead son. Instead, I was reborn with renewed purpose…I was now the mother of three dragons and I knew that together we were going to cast off the bonds of slavery and take back our birthright with fire and blood”.

It was the movement of the dragon raising its head that shook him from his rest. He scrambled to his feet and stood swaying slightly, the icy ground having numbed his feet. The calls collected and echoed around him and he was forced to block his ears when Morningstar roared a single splintering chorus in response. The light had dwindled to almost total darkness and yet he could still make out their shadows as they rippled in a spiral towards the field.

They waited until the dragons shook out their wings and folded them before dismounting. Daenerys slid to the ground first.

“Anything?” she asked anxiously.

Jon shook his head.
“No, Your Grace”, he replied.

Tyrion was brushing the snow from his shoulders as he waded through the snow towards them.

“Your Grace”, he called out, “it’s time to return to Winterfell. We have crisscrossed the north and flown over the lands just south of the Neck with no results. Perhaps after a hot meal and some well-earned rest we will gain some perspective and rethink our strategy”.

Jon had already turned away to adjust Morningstar’s saddle. He was expecting her to agree with Tyrion. He had not failed to notice the darkening shadows under her eyes, her hollowed out cheeks. She carried no hidden reserves of energy...he knew she was just as exhausted as he was. And yet when she didn’t answer Tyrion with a yea or a nay, he turned back to find her staring into the sky. The moon was rising over the Frostfangs, a coppery red orb that took up half the night sky.

“Tis a blood moon tonight, Your Grace”, commented Jon.

She remained silent, only nodding once to acknowledge that she had heard him. Then she reached up and pulled the hood of her fur cloak over her silvery hair.

“No”, she finally said, “we press on”.

Tyrion began to protest but Jon interrupted him, his patience growing dangerously thin.

“Where, Your Grace?” he shouted. “Where exactly do you want us to go now? We have been everywhere within the boundaries of the northern territories. To take the time to venture beyond these borders would be tantamount to abandoning all those who are counting on us to return in time to dispatch our enemies. As it is, Winterfell may be already under attack and yet here we stand in a barren wasteland looking in vain for a creature that could be anywhere...a creature that knows no bounds...a creature that, despite all your reassurances to the contrary, may have simply flown away to warmer climes in search of more bountiful game. Your child, Your Grace, is still a wild creature, free to do as it pleases”.

As she lowered her gaze, Jon could hear Tyrion suck in a lungful of frosty air and let it out slowly.

“It is true that my dragons are free”, she replied passionately. “It is true that they are free to fly away and never return. But they don’t. And I believe you understand why, Jon Snow. Look to your own dragon...look to your direwolf...we have a bond with these creatures that is steadfast and true. I broke promise with Rhaegal and Viserion once and it cost me dearly. I kept them chained up and in the dark in the mistaken belief that by doing so my people would be safe. But a dragon cannot thrive if it is enslaved. I set them free because I love them and they are a part of me. I resolved a long time ago that I would never be bought and sold again...that I was no man’s commodity. And neither are my dragons. A part of me belongs to them....and they to me. It is my sincere belief that our fates are entwined until we cease to exist so that is why I refuse to give up searching for Rhaegal, because to do so would be like giving up on me”.

She returned to staring at the sky.

“The queen of the night is sending up a distress signal that a dragon is trying to eat her”, she said. “So we must fly to her rescue and make a loud noise in an effort to make it stop”.

The burbling noises started deep within her throat before finally bursting from her lips into full-fledged laughter. Even in the half-light of the moon Jon could see a look of concern pass over Tryion’s face.

“It is a tale as old as time, told to me when I was a child…and I confess that the image of a dragon
biting great chunks out of the moon never fails to amuse me”, she explained as her laughter faded away. “Come…if we fly towards the moon I am certain that we will find Rhaegal tonight”.

Jon wished that he could be as confident. Nevertheless, he climbed back aboard Morningstar’s back and pressed his heels into the dragon’s sides as a signal to take to the air once again.

The wind was blowing hard as they pushed northeast. The warm radiance of the moon’s glow belied the frigidity of the air that surrounded it. It hurt to breathe so Jon slipped his scarf over his mouth in order to warm up the air a little before it entered his lungs. His eyes constantly searched the ground below which was cast into high relief with the whiteness of the snow contrasting with the blackness of the rocks and trees that dotted the landscape. He began to despair that this attempt was proving to be as fruitless as their previous searches until the smell of smoke assaulted his nostrils. Unless I’m delusional, he thought as he peered ahead, I think I see fire burning below.

He raised one arm and shouted to get the others’ attention. Daenerys whooped loudly when she saw the flames and then leaned forward on Drogon’s neck to whisper a few words. The dragon responded by opening its enormous maw, revealing a ball of fire already forming in the back of its throat. Within a couple of seconds, the ball burst forth in a streak of flames, accompanied by a loud guttural roar. Almost instantaneously they heard a screech from below, followed by burst of fire. They had found Rhaegal.

As they dropped in altitude, Jon could see that there were several fires burning. Dark shapes twisted within the flames before dropping to the ground. The snow hissed as black pools sank into the icy surface. Nearby, bathed in moonlight, stood a weirwood tree, the size of which Jon had never seen before in his life. It seemed to reach out to embrace the entirety of the northern landscape, its red leaves rustling furiously as the cold winds pushed its limbs to bow and sway. Its roots, Jon surmised, must go on deep into the bowels of the earth, seeking sustenance to keep it from perishing in such a hostile land.

Rhaegal laid down another blast of fire before turning and rising up to meet them. As the dragon drew closer Jon was surprised to discover a shadowy form riding on its back, clinging to its neck. He heard Daenerys call out for the rider of her dragon to reveal him or herself. At first there was no response. Then Rhaegal began to bank slightly and pull away from the other dragons before emitting another burst of flames that lit up Jon’s face. He instantly recoiled, throwing up a hand to block his eyes from the intense light and heat.

“Jon?” said a faint voice from the darkness.

Jon was confused and momentarily disoriented. It sounded like the voice of a boy on the cusp of manhood, cracking and straining to make itself heard.

“Who are you?” shouted Jon.

He wasn’t sure the boy had heard him so he nudged Morningstar closer to Rhaegal until their wings almost touched. Morningstar lifted its head and let out a long, throaty breath of gentle fire…just long enough to light up the features of the shadowy figure that straddled Rhaegal’s back. And in that split second Jon could see the pale face of its rider…a boy with fiery hair and bright blue eyes whose resemblance to Robb and Rickon was uncanny.

“Bran?” croaked Jon.

His mouth had gone dry. The name felt like it had been spoken by somebody else. Shock and joy intermingled in his chest, causing it rise and fall rapidly. Unlike his other surviving siblings Jon had little to no reason to believe that Bran was still alive. Once word had spread that Bran had gone north
of the Wall, everyone assumed that he had perished along with the Reed children.

The boy gestured towards the ground.

“Follow me, brother”, shouted Bran.

As Morningstar glided towards the ground, Jon detected the sounds of steel striking bone, accompanied by shrieks and grunts. A small, hooded figure was whirling and slashing at half-rotted animated corpses with precision and gusto, clearly practiced at the art of cutting up the recently risen dead into small, still quivering pieces.

“Stand aside, Meera” cried Bran.

Meera threw back her hood and sheathed her sword. Then she danced away a few feet to safety before Rhaegal set the remains ablaze. As Jon watched the flames leap into the arctic air, he could hear the other two dragons screech as they drew closer to the ground. He whirled around when he heard Daenerys’ voice. She was striding towards Bran and Rhaegal, slapping one glove against the other in fury.

“You!” she roared. “Get off my dragon now”.

She took hold of one of Bran’s ankles and jerked on it. As Bran protested, Jon tried to intervene but Meera was quicker.

“Let go of him”, snarled Meera as she tried to peel Daenerys’ hand away from Bran’s leg.

Tyrion insinuated himself in between the two women, his arms outstretched to keep them apart.

“Your Grace”, he puffed, “the boy is a cripple. See…his legs are useless so he has to be tethered to the dragon’s back or he will slide off”.

Daenerys let go as if she had been stung and looked shamefaced.

“He can’t walk, Your Grace”, said Jon softly. “He’s been this way for a long time. He can’t walk but apparently he can fly”.

Daenerys folded her arms across her chest and jutted out her chin.

“Being a cripple does not give him the right to steal my dragon”, she said.

Meera’s hand shot out over Tyrion’s shoulder and she shoved Daenerys.

“He didn’t steal it”, she said, glowering at the little queen. “It came to him of its own accord”.

While Tyrion attempted to placate both women with soothing words, Jon found his attention diverted by a clear change in the atmosphere. Thousands of small particles of snow suspended in mid air glistened in the moonlight. Then they suddenly began to swirl and dance while an eerie mist billowed up behind them.

“Your Grace”, said Jon urgently, “now is not the time for petty squabbles. We need to be aloft and quickly”.

The two women fell silent while a small sound escaped Tyrion’s lips as he witnessed the icy white tide threatening to engulf them. He tugged on Daenerys’ hand and waited until she had nimbly climbed aboard Drogon’s scaly hide before mounting Viserion while Bran leaned down and held out a hand to Meera.
“You knew this time would come”, he said solemnly.

She hesitated for a second before grasping his outstretched fingers and scrambling atop Rhaegal’s back. Then she wrapped her arms around Bran’s chest and buried her face in the back of his neck.

“I’m ready”, she mumbled.

As the dragons climbed higher, wights stumbled out of the mist. They raised their skeletal arms, rotting flesh and fabric hanging in tatters from their bleached bones, and clawed at the black sky. Jon shivered as he watched the shrinking earth come alive. The army of the dead was spreading across the frozen tundra, blotting out the snow in undulating dark waves as they staggered across the plains.

He stopped trembling when he slipped beneath Morningstar’s skin. His churning emotions had knocked him sideways by six for a moment but now a sense of calm had descended over him. He knew that now was the time to set aside all feelings and become a dragon.

“Burn them”, he heard Daenerys cry out in a guttural scream as Drogon began its descent. “Burn them all”.

The dragons unleashed their fury and set the chill fields and icebound rivers ablaze. The fires lit up the darkness. The wights twisted in a grotesque dance, burning pieces of carrion before melting into the snow. The dark grey smoke, billowing into the air, carried a familiar scent that assaulted his nostrils and refused to leave…the nauseating sweet smell of charred, putrid flesh.

The dragons spread out across the firmament, their riders calling out to each other across the frigid void. They swooped and soared until exhaustion began to overtake them. Jon could feel the bitter winds, which had been biting at the exposed skin around his eyes, cutting through his many layers of clothing. He shook violently as his muscles tried to create some warmth. Not even the infrequent blasts of fire coming from between Morningstar’s jaws were providing any relief against the unrelenting cold and he knew that if they continued to wage war they and the dragons risked succumbing to the elements. By his reckoning this skirmish was just one of many more to come. He had no doubt that the number of dead that lay frozen in the ground just waiting to be resurrected far outnumbered the stars that dotted the sky. This war would not be won tonight. He raised a shaky arm.

“It’s time”, he called out.

The shadows drew closer, thrown into relief only by the gentle moonlight above and the lingering fires below. Jon nodded as they joined him one by one, creating a loose formation before turning their eyes south.

The small fires that ringed Winterfell’s walls testified to yet another nightly siege. The soldiers that greeted them were hollow-eyed and mostly silent. Two rosy fingers of dawn were creeping across the horizon as the riders slowly dismounted the dragons, their limbs stiff with cold and fatigue. Meera was already unlacing the leather straps that bound Bran’s legs to Rhaegal when Jon laid a hand lightly on her back.

“Please, let me”, he said, reaching out to still her clumsy fingers.

She hesitated at first and then nodded before stepping aside.

Bran slid into his arms once freed from the constraints. Jon cradled him in arms, sagging with the weight of a boy grown heavier over time. He is almost a man, thought Jon wistfully, remembering the small, sleeping boy he’d left behind when he departed for the Night’s Watch. Bran slung his arms
around Jon’s neck and tilted his head closer.

“Jon”, whispered Bran into his ear, “I have so much to tell you”.

Daenerys mustered her reserves and strode into the castle first, loudly calling out for a hot bath and a warm meal. Within minutes she was swarmed by her handmaiden, plucked by Sansa from the flocks of young orphaned girls who had flown to Winterfell for safety. Jon pulled one of them aside and instructed her to find Sansa, Arya, Rickon and Val and have them meet him in the great hall as soon as possible. Tyrion offered to accompany him while Meera remained silently at Jon’s elbow, keeping an anxious eye over Bran.

“Oh how I wish that such a reunion amongst my own kin could prove to be as joyous”, said Tyrion, leaning against the heavy door as Jon and Meera stumbled past. He remained a sentinel near the doorway, keeping a watchful eye on the corridor.

Jon carried Bran up the few short steps to the dais and deliberately lowered him on to what had once been their father’s seat. Bran’s eyes popped open and he gripped the worn leather armrests as he squirmed in an effort to get comfortable against the chair’s rigid back.

“It’s been a long time since I was acting lord of Winterfell”, said Bran with a sigh.

Meera took up the seat next to him and placed a protective hand over his.

Jon sat down on the wooden platform and slumped against the chair his brother now occupied, Bran’s atrophied legs dangling helplessly next to him.

“There’s no acting this time, Bran”, said Jon. “You are now the rightful heir to Winterfell”.

Arya burst into the room first, letting out a loud shriek when she caught sight of her younger brother.

“Another member of my pack has returned”, she cried happily as she threw her arms around his narrow shoulders.

She attempted to rain kisses on his upturned face, despite his protestations, and would have succeeded had not Sansa and Rickon, with Shaggydog close on his heels, entered the room making a joyful noise.

Tyrion exited the room shortly after their arrival, a look of naked yearning crossing his face before he turned towards the corridor. Jon had already risen to his feet and removed himself from the dais to allow his siblings more room to greet their newly returned brother. His mist filled eyes were following Tyrion’s departing form when he sensed Ghost’s arrival with Val close behind. She took one look the happy reunion and grinned. Then she held out her arms to Jon and within three strides he was within her embrace.

“Another one”, she murmured with a throaty chuckle. “Is your family finally complete?”

He laid one hand on the fundus of her swollen belly.

“No until this one arrives”, he growled softly.

“Ghost”, shouted Bran happily when he caught sight of the direwolf.

Jon felt a sense of longing wash over him when he heard his brother's cry.

“Bran”, he asked curiously. “Where’s Summer?”
The boy’s eyes shifted towards Jon, a smile still playing on his lips.

“He’s coming, Jon”, he replied, his gaze steady but guarded. “It’s going to take some time but I swear to you he’s coming back”.

Domestic arrangements were made after the reunion with Meera stubbornly vowing to bunk in with Bran no matter where he was housed. Sansa took exception to her decision and Bran’s tacit approval. It struck her as being wholly unnecessary now that he had been returned to the bosom of his family and completely unseemly as Meera was the well-bred daughter of one the Starks’ most loyal houses.

“While we are ever so grateful for all care and protection you accorded my brother, you need not continue to be his dogsbody”, quibbled Sansa. “As the lord of Winterfell he will have no lack of servants to attend to his every need”.

Val could see that Sansa had pulled herself up straight and was subconsciously using her superior height to bend the diminutive Reed woman to her will. And when Meera had no words in reply, the look on Sansa’s face indicated that she considered the matter closed. It wasn’t until Jon lifted Bran from the chair and headed down the dais that she suspected otherwise. She caught Meera’s arm as she attempted to follow them.

“Did I not make myself clear?” asked Sansa, her voice seething.

Meera shook off Sansa’s grip and pushed her aside defiantly.

“Leave it, Sansa”, said Bran sharply. “Wherever I go, Meera goes…that’s just the way it has to be”.

As Jon departed with Bran in his arms and Meera by his side, Val remained behind. She was alarmed by the look on Sansa’s face. She took her good sister’s arm and tucked it beneath her own. Even Arya was not oblivious to Sansa’s distress.

“Let it go, Sansa”, said Arya. “Just let it go”.

Sansa’s face crumpled and she turned to bury her face on Arya’s shoulder, heaving great sobs while Val rubbed her back and made soothing noises. All the while Rickon sat on the floor patting Shaggydog. He occasionally looked up looking shamefaced about his sister’s tears but unsure as to what to do to make her feel better.

“Don’t think that it hasn’t gone unnoticed all the work you’ve been doing and all the stress you’ve been under”, said Arya. “You were bound to crack under the strain”.

Sansa lifted her tear stained face and looked at her in wonder.

“You…you don’t think of me as some hard-faced controlling bitch?” she stammered.

Arya chewed on her lower lip for a few seconds and Val could see that she was searching for some appropriate words, ones that would not sting.

“This world is fucked up, just now, Sansa”, she replied. “And I know…I know that you are trying to keep us all safe and together until somehow we can make this world right again. And while I might not always agree with how you go about doing it…I still admire your stamina, your courage and your sense of…what is right and decent in the face of utter chaos”.

Sansa lifted her hands to her face briefly before letting them slide until they rested on her bosom. Then she began to laugh.
“Oh, feckless gods”, she chortled. “I have been making mountains out molehills, haven’t I.”

After the laughter faded she let out a long, deep sigh while Val gave her one final pat on the back.

“You’ve been tethered to duty and responsibility tighter than a young woman should”, said Val. “You’ve got to let the rest of us help take some of the burden from your shoulders”.

Jon was met by two burly guards who took over carrying the newly arrived lord of Winterfell to his quarters. The rooms were cramped and the damp was rising between the rushes but the linens were clean and a fire burned cheerily in the fireplace.

After Bran had been installed near the fire, Meera sat at his feet and rolled up his fur leggings. She examined Bran’s legs for open sores and did the same for his back after having him lean forward first.

“If you don’t find them right away then they can get infected”, she said briskly as her fingers slid over his skin. “And then there is always the risk of frostbite”.

Jon assured her that Sam would able to take over Bran’s care, thus relieving her of at least one responsibility.

“I don’t mind”, she murmured as she pulled down Bran’s shirt and exhorted him to lean back. Bran did as he was bid and then closed his eyes.

Jon believed that Bran had dozed off until he finally spoke after a minute’s silence.

“Has Sansa emptied Aunt Lyanna’s tomb yet?” asked Bran.

Jon was startled out of his own reverie and turned towards Bran wondering how he knew. Had he heard some snatches of conversation while passing through the corridors on their way to the great hall? Meera spoke before Jon could answer.

“He knows things he shouldn’t”, she replied cryptically.

They were interrupted by a gentle knock on the door. Jon admitted a servant bearing three bowls of steaming mutton stew, a pitcher of ale and thick slices of freshly baked bread slathered with butter. They ate quickly, sopping up the last of the gravy with the few remaining crumbs of bread. Then Jon poured out three flagons of ale. Bran raised his first and proposed a toast.

“To family”, he said with a cheeky grin before downing a generous swig.

When he began to sputter and cough violently, Meera rose from her chair in alarm. She placed one hand on his chest and gave his back a few generous whacks with the other until he held up one hand to indicate that she should stop.

“All right, then?” she asked, a pinched worried expression on her face.

He nodded, reluctant to speak until the coughing had completely subsided.

She glanced at Jon.

“Reckon he’s never had ale”, she said, managing a small smile.

Jon shook his head.

“Nah…he’s had ale before”, he explained. “But we used to water it down before giving it to him…”
me and Robb. I reckon that’s why he thought he could handle a big gulp like that”.

Jon leaned back in his chair, pleased to have a full belly and tasty quaff to wash it all down. He regarded the flames burning in the fireplace before picking up the thread of their earlier conversation.

“Why did you ask about Aunt Lyanna’s tomb, Bran?” he asked.

Bran was trying to look nonchalant but he was clearly failing. He appeared to be bristling with excitement... like a child with a closely held secret that he was eager to share. Nevertheless, he still chose his words carefully rather than let them tumble out of his mouth.

“If what I have seen is correct, then everything changes”, replied. “And I believe that the answers are to found in Aunt Lyanna’s tomb”.

Jon took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he took another sip of ale.

“Well then...let's ask Sansa”, said Jon with a smack of his lips.
The air was thick with smoke from the many fires that burned. As he rubbed his irritated eyes, children raced past him in a game of hide and seek…shrieking with triumph whenever their prey had been discovered. Hanging from the long heavy beams above his head were root vegetables, nuts and dried fish while below freshly laundered clothes were draped across the empty tombs to dry. The women were gossiping quietly while they stripped the bark from the wood they had gathered and skinned the fat squirrels that had been caught in their snares. And, when he pricked up his ears, Jon was sure he could hear the primal grunts of passion coming from a dim, distant corner.

The door to the crypt was propped open a few inches to allow some fresh air to enter this fetid space. Snowflakes danced in the shaft of light that shone into the gloom while the fires sputtered whenever the wind whistled through.

Sam stood before the empty tomb, one arm resting across his ample belly while the other was raised with one finger tapping against his lips. He was deep in thought and Jon was rapidly losing patience.

“Sam”, said Jon sharply.

Sam screwed up his face in concentration and thrust his finger forward until it was inches from Jon’s nose.

“Shush, Jon”, said Sam. “I’m trying to remember”.

Jon held his tongue as long as he could, knowing that a recent outbreak of the croup was making Sam more than a little testy. But the hour was getting late, Bran was waiting…and the heady mixture of the smell of too many bodies crowded into one place combined with the odour of the decaying dead was getting oppressive and he longed for some fresh air. He sighed and glanced at a small of knot of women nearby.

“Ladies”, he called out, “can any one of you help us out here?”

One of the women set aside a potato she had been scraping and wiped her reddened hands on her skirt.

“What sort of help are you lookin’ for, lovey?” she asked cheerfully.

Jon pointed to the Lyanna’s empty tomb.

“Were you here the day that the maester was here to supervise the emptying of this tomb?” he asked. “He was called away before the task was finished and we believe the crate containing her bones, and most likely other crates, were left here to be dealt with later”.

The woman glanced at the other women and they all shook their heads. But then one of the younger women spoke up.

“Mebbe my gran might know summit”, she said as she scrambled to her feet.”She spends most of ‘er days in ‘ere”.

She walked over to a pallet of straw and gently shook what Jon had taken to be a bundle of rags heaped upon it. A tiny woman with a pruney face and rheumy eyes rolled over to confront her granddaughter.
“What are ye wanting?” demanded the older woman, her voice querulous and shrill.

The granddaughter pointed at Jon.

“The lord commander, Gran…’e needs ta know where the pretty lass’ bones may ‘ave been put”, replied the young woman.

The granddaughter had to repeat the question a couple of times while her grandmother, cupping a gnarled hand to her ear, struggled to understand the question fully.

Comprehension eventually dawned on the older woman’s face. After bobbing her head up and down several times she rose slowly to feet with the aid of her granddaughter. Then she tottered over to a dark corner of the crypt where a makeshift table stood, adorned with a heavily soiled cloth and a lit tallow candle. She passed the candle to her granddaughter and then pulled off the tablecloth, revealing three large crates stacked on top of each other. Sam was almost beside himself with relief.

“Would you mind?” he asked the young woman as he gestured towards the candle.

He knelt down and passed the candle over the crates. Then he slid his fingers over two marks carved into the middle crate before turning to face Jon, a look of triumph beaming upon his face.

“She’s in here…I remember making those marks myself”, said Sam as he clambered to his feet. He brushed the dust from his knees and rubbed his hands together.

“Well, shall we crack it open and see what’s inside?” asked Sam.

Jon shook his head.

“No, I promised Bran we would bring it to him first”, he said as he lifted the top crate up and laid it on the dirt floor.

He signaled to the guard posted near the door and told him to arrange to have the other two crates brought to the maester’s quarters. Then he and Sam each grabbed a rope handle and lifted the crate containing Lyanna’s remains. But before they could depart the old woman laid a claw like hand on Sam’s plump forearm.

“’ere…what about my table then?” she asked. “I’ve got nowt else to lay my supper on now”.

Sam glanced at Jon, his head cocked to one side. Jon stammered out a promise to have one of the carpenters bang together a small table for her. She stared at him for a few seconds and then shook her head as she turned to lower herself upon her straw pallet.

“Men are always making promises”, she grumbled darkly. “Don’t always mean they’re good at keeping them”.

Bran’s day had been meticulously planned from the moment he awoke at midday. Sansa sent Satin as her emissary, trusting in her chief steward’s deferential attitude and his gift of persuasion. Armed only with an agenda of the day’s proceedings, Satin rapped sharply on Bran’s door and was greeted by Meera who tried to send him away.

“He’s resting”, she said curtly.

But Satin was not so easily put off. Before she could close the door in his face, he stuck his foot against the jamb and only winced when the heavy oak door struck his ankle bone.
“If it please, milady”, said Satin through gritted teeth, his face squeezed into the narrow gap between the door and the doorframe while Meera held fast on the other side, “This won’t take but a few minutes of Lord Stark’s time. Lady Sansa has commanded both the servants and vassals of House Stark to attend a series of meetings today to pay homage to their new lord. And some of the leaders of the free folk have requested some time also to meet with him to…to take the measure of him before they pledge their allegiance”.

He was met with complete silence. Then Meera suddenly kicked at his foot. But Satin held firm…both his foot and his tongue, straining not to utter any of the oaths he had learned at his mother’s knee in the Oldtown brothel where he had been raised. He winced before trying again.

“Meera?” called out Bran. “Who’s at the door?”

Satin knew he had won this battle but was careful to school his face into one of bland concern when finally given entrance to the room. He knew it would not do well to make an enemy of Meera Reed who had clearly established herself as Bran’s gatekeeper and general factotum. He was aware that although he was not as slick as those shameless sycophants who circulated around the court in Kings Landing, working as a prostitute had given him the skills to flatter and cajole even the most difficult of clients. That, and a pleasing personality, had saved him from a beating more than once.

As Jon and Sam made their way towards Bran’s solar, Sam prattled on about on about medical matters with Jon only half listening.

“It’s the steam from boiling water that does the trick, Jon. It’s loosens up the phlegm. And then a little dose of honey to soothe their throats…there’s the ticket”, said Sam. “It’s not necessarily a cure but it eases their suffering”.

Once they reached the door to Bran’s solar, they laid the crate of the floor and instructed the guards to keep a watchful eye over it. Loud chatter was spilling from the room as a contingent of the free folk was already crowded inside. Jon and Sam shouldered their way inside. Members of the Stark family were already arrayed before them with Bran seated at the scarred walnut desk, his hands clasped before him, waiting patiently for the din to die down. Sam positioned himself off to the side while Jon shook his head at the sight of Arya’s beckoning fingers urging him to join them. There was barely enough room to breathe so he positioned himself near the door in case he felt the need to escape.

Satin stood at the edge of the desk, his hands signaling the crowd for quiet. Fed up being ignored, he stuck his fingers under the tip of his tongue and let out an ear piercing whistle.

“Quiet, everyone”, said he shouted. “The lord of Winterfell wishes to speak”.

“Which one?” shouted a familiar voice from the back of the room. “The little ‘un…or the slightly bigger ‘un?”

The crowd broke out into peals of laughter. Jon grinned as he turned, craning his neck trying to find the speaker amongst a sea of faces. Within seconds he spotted the broad face capped by the shock of white hair and pushed his way towards him.

“Ee, lad…tis good to see you”, growled Tormund, lowering his booming voice. “A rum situation is this. Is the wee lad not upset that his brother has suddenly shown up out of the blue and taken his place?”

Jon gave his head a quick shake.
“Rickon never expected to inherit Winterfell, not with two older brothers”, he replied. “I expect he’s simply content to have Bran back within the fold”.

They listened attentively while Bran explained the new power structure within the family ranks and requested that the free folk renew their pledge to House Stark. Tormund watched the proceedings with folded arms, working his lower lip in and out, something clearly on his mind. He leaned over.

“Do you not find it passing queer that a crippled boy and a tiny wee girl managed to survive the trek into the frozen barrens north of the Wall with nothing but the clothes on their backs?” he asked. “I…I know he’s a warg like the rest of your clan… but you know that as well as me that you’ll no survive for long if you don’t lay down any food first. As soon as the bitter winds begin to blow the animals go to ground or flee in the face of winter’s wrath. Even somebody familiar with the terrain would be hard pressed to know where to find them… even a direwolf”.

“They had help”, replied Jon vaguely.

Tormund’s eyes widened with interest.

“They had able-bodied companions along for the journey who perished at along the way”, explained Jon further. “And then the Children of the Forest came to their aid”.

Tormund’s bushy white eyebrows shot up and he turned his eyes forward again, snorting in disbelief.

“Our forebears told us the Children were all dead”, he said. “There’s been no sighting of them for generations”.

Jon gave him a small smile.

“And we were taught that the Others were mythical creatures who existed in a time long forgotten”, he said. “So we were both misinformed”.

“Aye”, Tormund agreed, “tis a topsy turvy world indeed”.

The meeting ended with the ceremonial shaking of hands and a consensus to continue supporting House Stark.

“Though I reckon we don’t have much choice”, added Tormund as he grabbed Bran’s hand and pumped it up and down. Then he leaned in closer.

“I saw you riding that dragon, lad”, he said, bristling with admiration. “Those balls of yours are going to be rock hard when they finally drop…har!”

He continued in the line of people heading towards the door. Jon was leaning against it, exchanging pleasantries with people as they filed past. Despite being southern born and castle raised, he claimed kinship to them through his marriage to Val. And they were most keen to accept him into the fold.

Tormund clapped him on the shoulder and invited him to join them in hoisting a tankard of ale in a toast to the new young lord. Jon smiled and shook his head.

“I have another matter to attend to just now”, he murmured with a glance at Bran.

After the last of the free folk had departed, only the family and Sam remained. At Sansa’s behest, Satin had taken a protesting Rickon out so he could attend his archery lesson. He scowled as he marched past the guards as they carried the crate into the room and laid it on the table in front of Bran before resuming their posts outside in the corridor. Everyone was silent as Sam jiggered the nails
loose and pried the lid off the crate. Then he peered at the contents before lifting out a small packet and laying it gently on the table.

“Bones…just as I recalled…and this”, said Sam peeling off the waxed wrapping to reveal a bundle of folded papers held together by a blue ribbon. The dried petals of blue winter roses crumbled and fell to the floor as he unfolded the brittle sheets of paper, smoothing out the creases and pressing down on the corners.

Arya leaned forward, bristling with impatience and curiosity, and reached for one of the letters.

“My Dearest Lya”, she began. Her eyebrows shot up and she continued to read in silence. The others followed her lead except for Jon who was feeling curiously detached at this moment. Instead he leaned against the furthest wall and closed his eyes, lulled by the low murmur of their voices and the crackling of the fire.

The nightly forays to do battle were definitely taking their toll. Val used to marvel at his ability to lapse into sleep within seconds of his head touching the pillow. Now he was plagued by bouts of insomnia, lying still while he tried to empty himself of all consciousness. Rest is as good as sleep, Old Nan always claimed. But even resting often lay beyond him. At some point he would often give up, dressing quietly so as not to disturb Val, and slipping away to seek companionship. If Sam wasn’t buried in a book or Satin wasn’t going through the accounts, they would often share a drink or two and reminisce about their days as green recruits with the Night’s Watch.

His eyes flew open at the sound of small, strangled cry escaping Sansa’s lips.

“She was with child”, she said, her voice barely audible.

Arya made a derisive noise in her throat.

“Never…Father would have said”, she exclaimed. “Are you sure?”

She snatched the letter from Sansa’s hand before waiting for a reply and read it quickly, her brow furrowed. Then she took a sharp intake of breath and let it out slowly before tossing the letter aside.

“It must have died”, she said bluntly. “Just as well…poor little mite would have grown up knowing it had been sired by a raper and that t’would have been a most shameful burden to carry all its life”.

Something in Jon leapt up at this revelation and he found himself meeting Bran’s steady gaze. A faint smile played on Bran’s lips before he spoke.

“And what if the child had lived?” he asked softly. “Such a child would have to be protected, secreted away as the king had been seen to show no mercy to a child born of Rhaegar’s line”.

Arya was like a hound with a hare in its sights as she stared down Bran. Then she swiftly turned her gaze towards Jon. But it was Sansa who spoke first.

“Jon”, she said, sounding hesitant.

Then she spoke his name again, this time with more conviction.

No, thought Jon as his head snapped back, a thousand times no. His head started shaking rapidly from side to side as if he had developed palsy. A jumble of words formed in his mind but none escaped his lips. Cold little hands stroked him as he felt all warmth fleeing the room. A tingling sensation crept over his fingers and toes before he felt the rest of his body begin to stiffen. Before Arya raised the alarm he knew that it was too late…he was rigid, already a corpse.
“Sam, do something…he’s gone as white as Ghost”, she cried.

Within two ticks Sam was by his side. He grabbed Jon around the waist, coaxing him to sit on the chair that Arya had dragged over to his side. Jon sank on to the seat and buried his face in his hands. While Sam made clucking sounds, Arya went to work rubbing Jon’s back and shoulders to bring him back to life. He heard the faint rustle of Sansa’s skirts first before she knelt down before him.

“Here…drink this”, she said.

He raised his head and took the goblet from her. Droplets of red liquid sloshed over the rim of the cup as he downed the contents in one long gulp. He stuttered out an apology for the droplets of wine that splattered her gown but she demurred.

“The state of my dress is the least of my concerns at this moment”, she replied as she took the goblet from his shaky hands and rose to her feet.

After taking a deep breath, he pressed his damp palms against his thighs and attempted to rise. But Sam stopped him by placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve had a bit of shock, Jon”, he said soothingly. “T’would be best to sit a while longer”.

Jon sat for a minute longer, sorting out the chaos sowed by Bran’s revelation. A wave of vertigo rolled over him. Steadying himself, he called out to his brother.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “If not and this is nothing but a cruel jape…”

A strangled noise tore out of Bran, like the squeal of a dog whose hind legs had been trampled by a horse.

“I saw it all, Jon. I saw Father promise his sister, your mother, that he would protect you. Father held you as she took her final breath, dying in a bed of blood in the Tower of Joy”, he cried.

Cold climbed up Jon’s spine and he shivered. He felt Arya’s hand slip around his fingers and grip them tightly.

“How could you have seen all this, Bran?” she asked.

Bran’s neck jerked back defensively. He caught his breath. His face flamed and he leaned forward.

“It wasn’t a fanciful dream and it wasn’t a mere vision. I was taught how travel to different points in time…pivotal points where destiny stood at the crossroads”, he replied. “Jon’s conception and birth was no accident. It wasn’t a violent act perpetrated by vile man upon a sweet young girl. It was purposeful, consensual and not without affection”.

Jon was on his feet, both hands slicing the air.

“If this is all true then Father…your father…was a liar”, he shouted. “I find it difficult to believe that the honourable Lord Eddard Stark could be forced to claim his sister’s bastard son as his own just so…”

Bile rose up in his throat and he began to choke on his words.

Bran folded his arms across his narrow chest. Jon could see that his words struck home but Bran managed to stay composed.

“I know”, said Bran. “And while it wounds me to think of Father in this light, I understand why he
did it…and so should you”.

Jon leaned back and squeezed his eyes shut. Something clicked in him and he suddenly felt exhausted. As he slumped against the cold stone wall, he automatically flexed the fingers on his sword hand, running the tips over the scars on the palm of his hand. The lightest touch brushed against his cheek and he batted it away in irritation.

“Jon, please”, pleaded Arya. “It matters not who sired you. You must know how much we love you and that you will always be our brother”.

He opened his eyes slowly. His eyes flickered between them as they stared mutely at him. He sensed their compassion but humiliating memories lay between them, untouched and unspoken. The bastard child…Lord Eddard Stark’s stain, he thought. How he’d lived with the stigma all his life…had almost made peace with it….and now this.

“I would like to be on my own, please”, he mumbled.

They glanced at each other uneasily. But the stubborn set of Jon’s jaw made it clear that he would brook no dissent. Sam gathered up the discarded letters and muttered something about examining them closer before exiting the room. Arya and Sansa made one final pitch to stay but he shook his head. The guards were summoned, armed with long flat paddles which were slipped through the slots in Bran’s chair which Sam had had modified. Then they lifted the Bran up, still seated in his chair. Reaching out, he clutched at Jon’s shoulder as he made to give them room to pass.

“Don’t despair”, said Bran gently. “Nothing that I said was intended to upset you. I simply needed you to know and perhaps understand. It’s the truth, Jon, and nothing more”.

Jon nodded silently, his head bowed.

He raised his face only when the door clicked shut. For a moment he stood paralyzed. Then he slowly began taking stock of all his body parts, like a man released from a narcoleptic fit. He rotated his shoulders and slowly shook his head from side to side. Suppressed images from his childhood flared up inside of him, ones that he thought had been extinguished long ago. And they filled him with a rage…a rage that spread throughout his body like a disease. He lunged forward and picked up a nearby chair and repeatedly smashed it against the wall. Splinters flew dangerously close to his eyes but he gave them no heed. Breathing heavily, he tossed the bits of wood still remaining in his hands on to the fire. Then he kicked at the remaining pieces, sending them skittering across the room.

“Tis a pity”, said a voice coming from behind him. “A lovely chair such as that surely deserved a better fate”.

He pivoted, his face crumpling at the sight of her. Within three strides he was buried in her open arms and openly sobbing. She made soothing sounds, raking her fingers through his unruly hair and kissing his flushed cheeks. She guided him to a spot by the fire and exhorted him to take a seat, along with the promise not to destroy any more furniture.

“Who told you?” he asked.

Val smiled.

“Arya”, she replied. “She was most concerned for your wellbeing”.

But clearly unconcerned about defying him, he thought. He sighed and leaned back, drumming his fingers on the hand rest. She stood behind him, kneading his neck and shoulders, her fingers easing out the tension between his shoulder blades. Then she leaned forward, her loose hair tickling his ear.
“She’ll have to be told”, she whispered. “The little queen…she must be told you’re her kin”.

“Aye”, he replied reluctantly. “I suppose she must”.

When Val finally persuaded him to return to their room to rest awhile, it took what felt like hours to get his body to relax. After finally felling asleep, he dreamt that he was on horseback. The sun had just passed its low winter zenith when he heard a great racket arise in the darkening forest ahead. Birds were fleeing into the sky, squawking in terror. He quickly dismounted and crept forward through the dense bush until he reached a clearing ringed by weirwood trees. At its center stood two dragons facing each other, beating their wings and puffing out their chests. Then they began to dance, kicking up the snow into thousands of ice crystals, lit up by the sun that shone through the shadows of the trees. The battle unfolded in glacial pantomime with the two dragons charging and countercharging until one of them spread its wings and unleashed a blast of fire. The other screeched and struggled to rise into the darkening sky, flapping its wings furiously. It circled overhead before letting loose a torrent of flames that licked at the surrounding trees. Within seconds the forest was ablaze and Jon was tearing through the brush, smoke stinging his eyes and heat searing his back. And then he awoke, his heart pounding in his chest and the taste of ashes lingering in his mouth.
Chapter 24

She watched silently as he peeled his clothes off, reading the tension in his jaw as he yanked the shirt over his head before tossing it to the floor. He had heeded yet another summons to the chambers of the dragon queen. But this time, Val surmised, all had not gone well.

It had been no easy task convincing Daenerys Targaryen that Jon was her brother’s son. And Jon didn’t help matters by sitting in stony silence, arms folded tight across his chest, while Sam carefully presented the evidence and Bran recounted the visions he had been sent. Jon noted her occasional glances in his direction. He could see her searching his face, observing his mannerisms…looking for a glimpse of the familiar Targaryen traits but coming up woefully short.

“You’ll be hard pressed to find traces of your brother in me”, thought Jon moodily. “My mother’s blood flows like a hot torrent through my veins, drowning everything in its path”.

He was a cipher to her…a puzzle she had to solve before she was prepared to call him family. He walked like a Stark and he talked like a Stark. The idea of any shared blood between them seemed preposterous and yet, a scant day later, he received the first of several invitations to join her in her chambers.

Initially these meetings were awkward. But they gradually warmed to each other as they sought and found some common ground. In the event of disagreement, they tacitly agreed to at least listen politely. So Jon refrained from rolling his eyes whilst she lectured him about the Targaryen dynasty and the family’s divine right to rule. She, in turn, kept her fidgeting to a minimum whilst he laboriously explained the history of the northern alienation and their desire for autonomy. Eventually they reached an acceptance of each other, a kind of reciprocity…enough to call each other family, albeit distant and a little strained.

Val had sensed a change in his mood as soon as he entered the bedroom. She waited until he slid under the furs and his head sank into the pillow before posing the question.

“So what did she want to talk about this time?” she asked cautiously.

He lay still for a few seconds, staring at the ceiling, before rolling over on to his side to face her.

“Her departure”, he said curtly.

Val gasped and struggled to raise herself up against her pillow.

“What?” she puffed. “Why?”

Jon sighed and waved a weary hand.

“Her troops have arrived in Westeros and she is ready to…how did she put it…fulfill her destiny”, he replied.

“Oh for…” sputtered Val.

Her words, even stifled, knocked them both silent. Her hands began to shake with fury.

“The gods damn her to all eternity”, she suddenly shouted. “Did you tell her that they ain’t done with us yet? That just because there hasn’t been an attack on Winterfell for a half a fortnight doesn’t mean that they’ve upped sticks and returned to the Land of Always fuckin’ Winter? They’ve been comin’
at us for nigh on twenty years now…believe me, they’re not going to give up that easily”.

He reached across to stroke her hair and made soothing noises.

“I’ve tried to convince her to stay”, he said. “She listened to my arguments and says she’ll give us her answer tomorrow”.

Despite his assurances there was still a lack of conviction in his voice that still left her feeling angry and betrayed. She snorted and rolled on to her back, staring over the hillock of her belly. She could feel the baby digging into her left side so she slid her hand down to attempt to push it back towards the middle, prompting another round of vigorous kicking.

“Our child will be born in darkness”, she muttered darkly. “And most likely will die in darkness, too, if she abandons us to those icy fuckers”.

Jon sighed and raised himself up on one elbow.

“She hasn’t said for certain that she’ll leave just yet”, he said. “There’s still hope she’ll see the sense of it and stay in the north until they’ve been driven back. Otherwise she puts her whole campaign in jeopardy”.

She remained unconvinced. She lay stewing in their bed until long after he had fallen asleep. As she watched his chest rise and fall she came to a resolution. She must up the stakes before the little queen had a chance to make a final decision. She would testify before her as only a child born north of the Wall could. It would be one final effort to convince Daenerys that she, and her dragons, must stay until winter begins to thaw and drip into spring.

She rose and donned the new brocade robe recently gifted to her by Sansa.

“It’s for your confinement”, Sansa had said upon presenting it to her.

Val looked baffled until Sansa explained that her mother had spent a period of time confined to her chambers prior to the birth of each of her children.

“Now there’s a rum do”, Val chortled in amazement. “T’wouldn’t work amongst the women of the free folk…too many chores to attend to. Life don’t stop just because you’re with child”.

As she rounded the corridor, her slippers slapping against the cold stone slabs beneath her feet, she could feel her hard resolve begin to soften. She stopped and wavered for a moment, glancing at the guard who stood in the shadows outside of Daenerys’ chambers. Then she raised her eyes to the flickering torch mounted above her shoulder and took a deep breath.

“I will be kind and gentle but firm”, she mouthed silently, taking a page from Sansa’s book. As she slowly released her breath, she rolled her shoulders once and felt the corners of her mouth relax into a pleasant smile.

After a few words were exchanged between the guard and one of Daenerys’ attendants, Val was admitted to the room.

Daenerys was propped up in bed, attended upon by one of her young girls who fluttered about her. As Val approached the bed, the queen bade the girl cease her twittering and retire to a corner near the fire. Then Daenerys patted the covers, an indication to Val to take a seat next to her. Gingerly, Val lowered herself until she perched awkwardly on the edge of the mattress.

“To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” asked a smiling Danaerys, taking up Val’s hand.
Val murmured vague words expressing regret for having disturbed the young queen before getting to the nub of her visit.

“No point beating around the bush”, she replied. “Jon says you’re planning going south sooner rather than later and I’m here to urge you to stay”.

The smile faded slowly from Dany’s face and her hands went limp. But Val refused to let go.

“Please, you can’t leave now”, she added bluntly. “You’re not done and we’re all doomed if you do”.

She could see Danaerys stiffen and her eyes dart towards the girl who still lurked in the shadows. She dismissed the girl with a curt nod.

“Leave…I will send for you if I need you”, she said.

Then she shifted her gaze back to Val, her violet eyes gone cold and dark like two lumps of unlit coal. She plucked at the covers and waited for the door to click shut before she lit into Val.

“I don’t see how this is any of your business”, she hissed, her cheeks flushed. “I have already listened to your husband’s entreaties and I am prepared to give them due consideration. But I will not be badgered and I will not have my decisions questioned. So if you have nothing else to say then I strongly suggest that you return to your bedchamber. A woman in your condition needs rest and not concern herself with the weighty matters of others”.

Val drew back and blinked rapidly. She was unprepared for such naked aggression and wondered, fleetingly, if the woman’s harsh words were borne out of a sense of guilt. Perhaps changing tack was in order.

“I apologize…Your Grace”, she said, the words almost sticking in her craw. “I didn’t intend to have my words offend you. I simply need you to understand the gravity of the situation. You and your dragons can leave us now to rejoin your armies. You are clearly spoiling to take back what is yours to avenge your family name. And I honestly do understand how important this is to you. For many years the clans of the Free Folk raided and quarreled amongst themselves. Back and forth we went stealing livestock, weapons, women, children…anything to gain an advantage over our enemies. Until the real threat arrived from further north. Nothin’ else mattered once they starting killing us, no matter which clan we belonged to. We don’t know why they’ve come or why they hate us so…we just know that they won’t stop until we’re all dead. So unless you’ve stumbled upon the Hammer of the Waters and are prepared to sever off the north from the rest of Westeros at the Neck then you’re still going to have to face them in due time”.

This time Val swore she could see a look of guilt pass over Daenerys’ face but it was gone in the blink of an eye. Then the dragon queen folded her arms tightly against her chest and regarded Val coolly.

“I’m not a fool”, said Daenerys. “I have been in the thick of this battle for several weeks now. But it is time to move forward…to realize my first goal which is to secure the Iron Throne. I cannot have my troops sit idly by, cooling their heels on ships anchored offshore”.

She made a dismissive motion which Val chose to ignore. Instead she remained rooted in place, feeling as large and ungainly as an aurochs and just as stubborn.

“Divert your troops to the north, then”, pleaded Val, her voice rising as a sense of desperation set in. “We’ll keep them busy enough”.
She could see the queen’s face deepen in exasperation.

“No”, she replied firmly. “I need to strike while the iron is hot. The little boy that sits upon my family’s throne knows I’m here and what I want. His family has ordered troops to be rushed immediately to Kings Landing for his protection. I need to take the city before those reinforcements arrive”.

Val opened her mouth to offer more words of persuasion but clamped her jaw shut once again when Daenerys raised one hand imperiously. It was clear that any further argument would not be brooked. Val struggled to her feet, one hand braced on the mattress while the other supported her bulging belly. She wondered if the gesture triggered a similar memory in Daenerys’ mind, causing her recall wistfully when she, too, was with child. The queen’s features softened and she leaned forward to catch Val’s wrist as she turned towards the door.

“Perhaps…perhaps we could reach a small compromise for the nonce”, said Daenerys. “I could leave Rhaegal in the north until further notice. And I could instruct Lord Barristan to outfit and supply a contingent of the Unsullied and have them transported to Winterfell as reinforcements”.

It was a small concession but one Val was prepared to accept for lack of anything else on offer. Daenerys’ tunnel vision as far as the Iron Throne was concerned made her blind to most everything else swirling around her but at least she wasn’t oblivious to the army of the undead that had been parading before her.

“Thank you…Your Grace”, she said. “That’ll do for now. But please take the time to mull over my words carefully. Once you’ve taken back your kingdom, you might find it’s like a body with its head chopped off and icy corruption pouring from the neck…spreading its disease across the countryside so rapidly that a cure is nigh impossible”.

Daenerys held on to Val’s hand as she turned towards the door, pulling her back.

“I promise you”, whispered Daenerys. “I promise you that the north will not be forgotten”.

Val stared back at her, mulling over her words

“Oh, aye, Your Grace”, she replied. “I believe you. And so will the old gods. The north always remembers. The north holds our memories like the coins in a miser’s purse, holding on to them until it is fair to bursting. The north is a hoarder of grievances both grand and petty. So it would be unwise to go back on your word ‘cause I reckon you’re going to need all the support you can get once you’ve taken your place on that poxy chair’.

Two bright red spots appeared on Daenerys’ cheeks and her lips curled. Val braced herself for a volley of cutting words designed to cut her down and put her back in her place. But none came. Instead, Daenerys nodded slightly and silently gestured towards the door. Val left the room swiftly, dimly aware that she had been holding her breath once the door closed behind her and she let out a rush of wind.

With her emotions still churning inside of her she knew that sleep was impossible now. She wandered the corridors for a while, stopping to chat with others as they passed by until she was drawn by the smell of baking bread wafting from the kitchen. She stumbled momentarily and stopped before entering. The cooks and their assistants were bustling about making preparations for the morning meal but that wasn’t what caught her attention. It was the sight of Tyrion, slumped in his chair, nursing a cup of what was no doubt strong wine, while Sansa, sitting opposite, was speaking to him in tones so low that Val couldn’t make out what she was saying. But their body language spoke volumes. Sansa was leaning forward, Tyrion’s right hand clasped between her own two
hands. It was the level of intimacy that caught Val by surprise. The two were almost always cordial but guarded with each other when in the presence of others, never giving much away. But now the barriers were clearly down and the expression on Tyrion’s face could only be described as a mixture of sorrow and anger.

“And what if he doesn’t”, he cried, his voice breaking.

Sansa hastily withdrew her hands to her lap when she heard Val clear her throat. She gave her a small smile in response and beckoned to her to join them.

“Didn’t mean to barge in on a private moment”, mumbled Val as she pulled up a chair.

As she sat down, Sansa pushed a plate of partially eaten bread towards her. Val gratefully ripped off a chunk and slathered it with butter before shoving it in her mouth. It was still slightly warm and it silenced the growling in her belly almost immediately.

“Have you heard the news?” asked Sansa.

Val swallowed and nodded.

“If you mean that the queen is leaving us then…yes”, she replied.

Then she shifted her gaze to Tyrion.

“And I expect you’ll be leaving with her”, said Val sharply.

She could see glimmer of guilt briefly cloud his mismatched eyes.

“Aye”, he replied with a tinge of resignation in his voice, “I go where my queen sends me”.

Val took another bite of bread and ruminated a few seconds before probing further.

“And where might that be?” she asked.

Tyrion glanced at Sansa before bowing his head slightly.

“I am to confront the Lannister forces, led by my Uncle Kevan, that are moving eastwards towards Kings Landing. I will be accompanied by a contingent of Dothraki bloodriders”, he mumbled.

Then he twisted his mouth into a grimace and cocked his head to one side.

“And we will do so at a point in the Goldroad where escape is…difficult”, he continued. “Either they will be forced to stand down and pledge allegiance to the queen or they will…suffer the consequences”.

Val arched an eyebrow.

“You would burn your own kin?” she asked.

Sansa looked around the kitchen furtively before leaning in towards Val.

“I’m sure it won’t come to that”, she whispered. “Tyrion’s uncle is a pragmatic man. He’ll see the wisdom in bending the knee”.

Tyrion swore before sloshing more wine down his throat.
“Then I repeat”, he gasped after swallowing the large gulp, “what if he doesn’t?”

Sansa stared at him for a few seconds, her face slowing hardening.

“You have to pick a side, Tyrion”, she said. “There can be no grey areas in this conflict. This is war…one that Daenerys is determined to win and whom you have sworn to support, even if it means foreswearing your own family”.

Tryion shook his head and stared into his cup.

“By the gods sometimes you're a damned intractable woman, Sansa Stark”, he said.

Then his head shot up.

“Or should I call you Sansa Lannister?” he asked, a mischievous grin playing on his lips.

Sansa pursed her own lips and pushed his cup out of reach. Then she silently rose to her feet and pushed back her chair with a loud scrape on the cold stone floor.

“You’re drunk, my lord”, she said. “And I should be abed”.

He caught her hand before she could move and hung on to it tightly.

“I’m sorry”, he pleaded. “I didn’t mean offend. But surely it wasn’t that odious being married to me…I…I barely touched you…and we did get along…most of the time”.

Sansa slowly turned back to him.

“You were decent to me, tis true. But your family was not”, she snapped. “So no…no, you may not call me Sansa Lannister. I took the precaution of renouncing my vows before the heart tree, in front of the old gods, and for the first time in life I felt like I was truly a free woman. And now I have my son and I have my brothers. And with our lives hanging in the balance there is no room for any other men in my life…especially in my bed. Do I make myself clear?”

Tyrion looked thoroughly chastened. But he wasn't done teasing her yet.

“So, it was as easy as that”, he said. “All you had to do was say a few words before a tree and your marriage vows went…poof. I know our marriage was unconsummated and a sham but I'm sure the High Septon would still disagree with your method of dissolving it”.

Val snorted and they both turned to look at her.

“Stupid rules…who gives a fart what some mucky muck High…whatever he is…says about the relations between a man and woman”, she said. “What matters is how they feel about each other”.

Sansa sighed and Tyrion gave Val a withering look.

“It matters if both families are looking to for a political bond, knowing that one will come to the defense of the other in times of trouble. It matters when it comes to claims of land and holdings”, he said. “It matters when it comes to inheritance. It matters if you don’t want your children to be considered bastards…like your husband”.

Val shook her head and rose to her feet.

“You kneelers make it too complicated to be together”, she replied. “And then you let others meddle in your lives…especially your families”.

She linked her arm with Sansa’s and then winked at Tyrion.

“Don’t take offense, man”, said Val. “She still cares for you. She just don’t want to be married to you, or anyone else for that matter”.

The queen’s departure came two days later with the announcement that the majority of her troops were assembling on Dragonstone, preparations for which had been arranged through Shireen. Dragonstone was now officially back in Targaryen hands.

They assembled outside the gates of Winterfell in the pre-dawn light, feeling the morning chill up their backs. As the sky turned purple, a signal that the sun would soon be on the rise, Jon realized that he had been clenching his teeth so hard that they ached. He had been struggling to contain his anger and disappointment over the loss of two dragons and their riders. He glanced at Val who crept closer to him and slipped one gloved hand into his.

“We’ll make due with what we’ve got and whatever crumbs she sends us”, she said softly.

He shook his head.

“We shouldn’t have to”, he grumbled.

Morningstar and Rhaegal swooped and chased one another in circles and dives until orange flame and thick black smoke erupted from Drogon’s maw and Viserion screeched out in approval. It was time to say goodbye. Jon was dimly aware of Tyrion telling of how his first encounter with the dragons nearly caused him to soil his pants. The men around him laughed and Jon realized that they were behaving as if they had known him for years instead of a mere few weeks. He will be sorely missed, thought Jon.

“Fare thee well, my lord”, said Jon, thrusting out his hand towards Tyrion.

Tyrion took his hand and shook it vigorously.

“And you, Snow”, he replied. “May good fortune always be by your side.”

His gaze briefly flickered to Daenerys who was slowly working her way towards them. He leaned towards Jon and lowered his voice.

“She is going to ask something of you and I need you to say yes even though your gut will scream no”, he said rapidly.

Before Jon could obtain more details Daenerys had pushed her way to his side and Tyrion had disappeared into the crowd of wellwishers that had come to say goodbye. They stood awkwardly facing each other, silent at first, uncertain as to what more could be said that hadn’t already been said. Then she suddenly lifted her right hand and pressed it lightly against his reddening cheek. It was an unexpected and wholly intimate gesture.

“You’re my kin”, she said softly. “Most likely the only kin I have left in the world. Once I have taken back the iron throne I will need to take a husband”.

He stared back at her and felt his heart sinking into his belly. As he gently disengaged her hand from his face, he looked around desperately for the duplicitous dwarf that, until now, he had considered his friend. He realized how gormless and panic stricken he must have looked when he heard her snigger, at first, and then try to smother her laughter with her freed hand.

“I know I’m a Targaryen but I wasn’t suggesting that”, she giggled. “Rest assured I have no designs
on you as my consort. I will require someone more…important”.

Jon ignored the unintended slight and managed a weak smile.

“May I offer you instead my advice on your choice of mate?” he asked.

She nodded slowly.

“Aye, in due time…but there’s more”, she said. “I…I don’t know if I can carry a living child to term. I’m not even sure that I can conceive a child at all. I believe that my womb is cursed…barren”.

She turned her eyes to the sky lightening in the east where the dragons were silhouetted against the rising sun.

“I need you to be my heir”, she said simply.

He hesitated. He wanted to say no. Every fiber of his being told him that it could be huge mistake. But he had never seen her looking quite so small and vulnerable before. He felt at this moment that he owed her this much…to help her in fulfilling her dream of restoring the Targaryen dynasty. He sighed deeply and then nodded. Perhaps she would outlive him and he might never have to fulfill his part of the bargain.

“Don’t die”, he replied. “Northerners rarely fare well when they go south”.

She chuckled and held out her arms to embrace him.

“I don’t intend to die”, she whispered in his ear. “Mayhaps that little boy who seats at my father’s seat will find the courage to kneel to the dragon queen. Mayhaps I’ll offer him a ride on Drogon’s back, to open his eyes… to let him see the world from another perspective. Then the throne will be mine and in due course I will create a new world order, nephew…just you wait and see”.

People around him gradually began to disperse after the departure of Daenerys and Tyrion until Jon found himself alone standing just outside the main gate. The world had gone almost silent in his head except for the sound of the trees moaning and cracking. To him they sounded like dying. The air was bitter, sharp in the lungs. He found himself padding through the snow, taking heed of the tracks all around him. The footprints were shallow, scoops of shadow in the white. He felt his heart begin to beat faster when his nose caught the scent of a marten and he began to growl softly.

“Jon”, said a voice sharply.

Arya was leaning over her horse, not three paces away, a quizzical expression upon her face and a bow slung over her shoulders.

“Sorry”, he mumbled. “I didn’t hear you”.

She grinned in understanding.

“You were miles away, I reckon”, she replied cheerfully. “I’m going out hunting before I lose the light. Do you want to come?”

The day was as bright and cold as you might expect with not a cloud in the sky. On such a day, as children, he and Robb used to play a game where they let spit drool from their mouths and measured how fast it froze once it hit the air. It was the kind of cold that refocused your attentions on staying alive.
“Aye”, he replied. “I’ve got a craving for fresh meat”.

They had been riding through the dense bush for about a quarter of an hour when they spotted smoke rising above the treeline. It lay so still and heavy above them that the sun was no longer visible. As they drew closer they found clearing containing blackened stumps and smoking ground. They peered through the thick haze looking for the source of the unmistakable scent of burnt hide and the underlying smell of cooked meat, fearful for what they might discover. To their relief they found only a young buck, charred and blackened.

“The dragons have left us a gift”, said Arya wryly.

She dismounted and took her knife from its sheath to cut into the animal’s haunch. She knew that the rest of the meat might be poisoned by the animal’s fear but beggars could not be choosers. She and Jon cut past the blackened muscle to a strip of warm, tender meat that was undercooked but still tasty enough. Then they brushed away grimy soot and ash from the ground nearby to reveal the fresh snow beneath. Wool blankets were retrieved from the packs on the horses’ backs and spread out across the snow so they could sit down to enjoy their impromptu feast.

They ate slowly, silently, savouring game which hadn’t been dried and salted. After some time had passed, Arya began to shiver and Jon realized he was cold too.

“Mind if I light a fire?” he asked.

She laughed.

Once they had eaten their fill they cut up the rest of the carcass and dowsed the fire. As they trussed and loaded up the remaining meat they chatted idly about what was uppermost on their minds.

“Do you really believe they have retreated north?” asked Arya.

Jon thought long and hard before answering.

“I…don’t know”, he finally replied. “I want to believe they’re gone because of the dragons but there’s a niggling part of me that refuses to believe that they would give up so easily. Val says they’ve been moving south as long as she can remember. She absolutely refuses to believe that they’ve simply turned tail and gone home after all this time”.

Arya shrugged and finished tying her knot.

“Bran’s crows have been crisscrossing the north for days now”, she said. “He says he’s seen no sign of them apart from pockets of wights straggling across the barrens”.

She placed one foot in the stirrup and hauled herself up to straddle the horse’s back. Then she took up the reins.

“Mayhaps…mayhaps they’ve slipped past us”, she said. “Mayhaps the attacks were a just a diversion. Mayhaps they’ve just been playing with us as they seek bigger game further south”.

Jon smiled indulgently as he mounted his horse.

“I’m not joking, Jon”, she said with a frown. “I know you’ve been burning plenty of wights but how many of the Others have you killed?”

Jon let the reins lie slack as he scanned his memories. The endless days of killing had become a blur. Sometimes when he drifted off to sleep he could see the dark masses of the dead crawling across
open fields. Death was everywhere. He had searched for the Others, the generals orchestrating the vast movement of reanimated troops, but they were rarely seen. Instead, their minions lurched across the frozen tundra as if led by an unseen hand. But still he sensed their presence, something far worse than death crouching close by.

“I’m not sure”, he admitted ruefully.

The acrid scent of charred wood tickled his nose and he rubbed it thoughtfully. He would seek out Bran upon their return; ask him to redirect his birds south. Then he took in a breath before taking up the reins, feeling the cold air sear his lungs. Cold and fire were equally capable of burning, he realized as he signaled to Arya that it was time to return home.
Chapter 25

She stood before the heavy, scarred door with her arms folded across her chest and her legs splayed as if anchored to the roiling deck of a ship. Her face remained impassive as the gaoler rattled the key in the lock but Jon could her lips twitch with impatience.

“You’ll find him much changed”, said Jon in a low voice. “I didn’t recognize him at first”.

Asha winced for split second before nodding curtly.

The door opened with a loud groan, revealing a room as spare as its sole inhabitant. He carefully placed the book he had been reading aside on the cot and slowly turned to face his visitors. The siblings stared at each other but for a moment until Theon lowered his gaze to the floor, looking at his boots like they had just jumped on to his feet. Asha maintained her stalwart stance but Jon could see signs of her mouth beginning to sag. She was the first to break the silence.

“What did they do to you, brother?” she asked softly.

Theon closed his eyes and shook his head as if suffering from palsy. When he finally spoke the words tumbled out of his mouth so quickly that he was forced to take a breath before finishing.

“What didn’t they do”, he cried. “They broke me, Asha, they broke me. I know I should have never come back…I know I should have listened to Father…I know I should have listened to you. Instead I listened to my own foolish desires and I have been punished a hundred fold for my folly”.

He was panting now as if his confession had taken the wind out of his sails. Tears streamed down his lined cheeks and he buried his face in his hands. Asha breathed a long sigh and turned to Jon.

“I need to make haste”, she said. “We encountered many dead things along the road so I want to return to my ships as soon as possible”.

Jon nodded and turned to the gaoler to take a message to the stable master to ready fresh horses for Lady Asha and her men. And to inform him also that she would be taking her brother home.

She watched the gaoler disappear around the corner before shifting her eyes back to Theon.

“Get up”, she said briskly. “Gather up your belongings. You’ll need everything because it’s brutally cold out there. Do you have the strength to sit a horse? I don’t need one of those horses to tire prematurely because it has been forced to carry extra weight”.

When he didn’t move she ventured closer.

“When didn’t you move” she said. “I can’t pretend to know what was inflicted upon you. I won’t pretend that I understand. But you have to put it all behind you…I need you to return to my ship with me now”.

She reached down to take his elbow but he yanked his arm away. Then he looked up at her with such wounded eyes that she flinched and took a step back.

“I’m no use to you”, he shouted. “I’m no use to anyone. So I might as well spend my remaining days locked up in this room. Mayhaps the Others will show some pity and conscript me into their army when Winterfell is finally overrun…at least then I wouldn’t be such a fuck up because I wouldn’t be in control of my own destiny”.
Asha shook her head and leaned over him.

“I’ve got no time for your self pity, Theon”, she said through gritted teeth. “Our father was murdered and our birthright was stolen from us. It’s time to go home and take back what is ours…only I can’t do it without you. I know you feel nothing but shame and self loathing for betraying your wolf kin. But lest you forget…you were born a kraken…and the only person stopping you from being a kraken now is you”.

Jon chimed in with a few words of his own.

“It’s time to go, Greyjoy…we need the room”, he said. “And, for what it’s worth, if Robb were alive today I believe he would have forgiven you”.

Theon looked up.

“Oh, aye”, he replied. “And what about you…do you forgive me?”

Jon hesitated for a second and then clamped his mouth firmly closed. Theon nodded in understanding.

“Well, your silence speaks volumes, doesn’t it”, he said. “You always were a jealous git, Jon. I was the trueborn son of a noble family…handsome, talented with a bow and talented when it came to women, if you know what I mean. And you were…what…an awkward, virginal bastard…the stain on Lord Eddard’s otherwise spotless life… the bane of Lady Catelyn’s existence”.

Jon swallowed his irritation. The old Greyjoy swagger was beginning to emerge from this wreck of a man and he needed him gone. But he still couldn’t resist just a minor rejoinder.

“Except now I’m also a dragon”, said Jon.

Theon sniffed and placed his hands on his thighs.

“Aye…a dragon”, he said with an insouciant shrug. “You’re good at burning shit, I’ll grant you…but you’re still a bastard by all accounts”.

He rose to his feet and began gathering up pieces of clothing that had been strewn about the room. Then he shrugged on his heaviest cloak and wound a woolen scarf about his neck. As he and Asha were about to depart, he abruptly turned and thrust out a hand towards Jon.

“No hard feelings at least?” he asked.

Jon looked at the misshapen hand with its flayed and missing fingers and grasped it firmly.

“No hard feelings, Greyjoy”, he replied.

He watched them depart under cover of darkness, a torchlight parade of horses, men and supplies. He had thought to persuade them to linger at least until there was light but these days the nights seemed to stretch on forever. Soon all light would be extinguished and there would be nothing but darkness.

He felt a light touch on his shoulder and turned to discover Arya at his elbow. She was watching the departing Greyjoy party with a pensive look upon her face. Jon wrapped one arm around her shoulders and leaned in.

“Are you thinking of joining them?” he teased. “They’re heading back to White Harbour to serve as
naval support for Daenerys’ forces”.

Arya jutted out her chin.

“It crossed my mind”, she muttered. “But they may be intercepted on their journey”.

Jon frowned.

“How did you come by this information?” he asked curiously.

She shrugged.

“Bran”, she replied as she slipped from beneath his arm and tugged on his wrist. “He’s waiting to speak to you in the broken tower”.

Jon raised an eyebrow before wordlessly following her.

Bran’s preference for spending time in the broken tower baffled and annoyed Sansa. When he insisted on spending time there she tried to warm it up with soft furnishings to make it more hospitable but Bran waved them away. He liked the tower the way it was…the way it had always been since he first day he had climbed it.

A family of barn owls roosting in the rafters shrieked and clacked their beaks as Jon entered the small, spare room. He glanced up at them for a moment, seeing their pale, heart shaped faces peering back at him with bright interest. Then he shifted his gaze to Bran who was seated in his wheeled chair. His small, still frame was wrapped in furs, a buttress against the bitter cold. Meera sat silently beside him and when she saw Jon she raised one finger to her lips and shook her head. Jon nodded and waited.

Bran’s eyes were closed but Jon could see his eyeballs moving rapidly from side to side beneath their lids. His breathing was long and deep and very slow and Jon knew that this was no ordinary slumber. The gods were sending him green dreams, fragments of memories and visions from the future.

Jon poked at the fire and watched snowflakes beginning to twirl and dance in the moonlight that poured from the open window. He crossed the floor to close the shutters against the encroaching storm and for a brief second the sky flickered as if filled with lightning. And then a clap of thunder shook the tower.

“Thundersnow”, muttered Jon under his breath as he set the latch. “I hope this doesn’t mean more endless days of snow”.

The wind was howling through the chinks in the shutters when Bran began to stir. His breathing had become panicked and shallow. Meera rose and wrapped her arms around him, refusing to let go when he tried to push her away. She whispered steadily in his ear until Jon could see Bran’s shoulders begin to relax. Then he stared at the flames licking at the chimney before turning his face towards Jon.

“A great kraken is rising from the depths of the sea, threatening to pull all ships asunder in its wake”, said Bran solemnly. “And the lioness is sharpening her claws as the threat to her cub looms closer. If cornered she will slash and roar with a ferocity heretofore unforeseen”.

Another crack of thunder heralded more wind. No doubt the storm outside was intensifying. Jon laid a hand lightly on Bran’s shoulder and leaned forward.
“And what of the Others?” asked Jon.

Bran’s lifted his eyes to the rafters.

“Aye”, he replied, “we’ve seen them. Just as you said they’ve gone south…slipped past us. We found them standing on the edge of a vast lake, staring at an island in the middle. A settlement perches on its banks”.

Jon glanced at Meera. His knowledge of southern geography was weak at best.

“I’m certain he means the Gods Eye. Harrentown is situated on its northern shore and in the middle rests the Isle of Faces. It has long been rumoured that some Children of the Forest and Green Men still dwell there. If so then no doubt we can persuade them to join us in the fight”, she clarified.

The owls were becoming restless once more. Their feathers fell about Jon, reminding him of fat snowflakes. Bran signaled to the guards at the door.

“We need to leave now”, he said. “The ice will freeze shortly, leaving them free to cross over to the island. If they achieve their objective then all is lost. Our world will become a frozen wasteland. If they don’t kill us outright then we’ll die slowly from starvation or be forced to feast on the flesh of the recently deceased. And then we’ll become the monsters, damned out of a greed for life”.

As Jon pulled on his gloves, he caught a furtive glance passing between Meera and Bran. Jon couldn’t read Bran’s expression but Meera looked almost guilty.

Bran waved Jon ahead, urging him to seek out Val to make his goodbyes. He instantly regretted taking a shortcut across the yard as the snow was blowing sideways and the world had disappeared into a swirling white mass.

Flashes of light nearly blinded him and the wind was so brutal that it pushed him to his knees. When he finally gained entry to the castle his face was painted in frost.

The smell of burning wood was strong. Jon reckoned that hundreds of fires were burning to ward off the chill of the storm. As he strode through the corridors, touching his hand to the walls, he listened to signs of life coming from behind the wooden doors. He heard a baby crying, its mother quietly shushing it. Further along he could voices laughing, moaning. But when he circled around the final corner he heard only silence. When he opened the door to his quarters he found the rooms cold and empty, the fires unlit.

He whirled around when he heard footsteps behind him and discovered Satin standing in the doorway.

“Are you looking for Val?” asked Satin.

Jon nodded.

“She’s with Sam”, said Satin.

He could see the panic rising in Jon’s eyes.

“She said to tell you that there’s nothing to worry about”, he sputtered as Jon pushed past him.

Jon was almost sprinting when he reached the maester’s quarters with Satin hot on his heels. His chest was heaving when he burst into the room, startling both Val and Sam. The former was stretched out on a narrow cot rubbing her distended belly while the latter was folding up torn strips of silk.
"What happened?" panted Jon.

Sam threw aside the bandages and approached Jon.

"Now, really, she’s fine", reassured Sam. "It was a minor fall...just a couple of scrapes and bruises, nothing serious".

Sam excused himself and left the room as Jon sank on to the cot next to her.

"Are you sure you’re all right?" he asked.

She reached up to brush away an errant curl.

"Ya daft beggar...I’m fine...really", she replied with a weak smile. "I’m a little sore, is all. Sam wants me to stay put a little longer just to make sure".

She could see his forehead wrinkled with concern.

"Here", she said.

She placed his hand on her belly. His eyes went wide and relief flooded his face as he felt the the baby squirm and push beneath his fingers. He looked at her in amazement and she looked back at him, her face relaxed. She waved at Satin who hovered with uncertainty in the doorway.

"Would you like a feel, too?" she chuckled.

He blushed and shook his head.

She turned her attention back to Jon when she felt him stealthily remove his hand.

"What’s wrong?" she asked sharply. "Sansa’s not here".

She knew that look, the stubborn set of his jaw. She knew he was leaving and this time she reckoned the stakes could be higher.

"When?" she asked.

"As soon as the weather lifts. Bran says if we wait any longer than we must then all might be lost", he replied.

She’d lost count of the number of times he had to leave her. She’d lost count of the number of times she prayed to the Old Gods to guide him through the darkness, to bring him home safely. She knew that the burden of losing him, especially now that she carried his child, might be nigh on unbearable.

"I...I haven’t got it in me to steal me another man", she said. "So you’re going to have to promise me, Jon Snow, that you’re not going to die".

His normally stoic demeanor slipped and his face began to crumple. Her words landed heavier on him than she anticipated and she instantly wished that she could take them back. She swallowed down her deep sense of foreboding and tried to lighten her words.

"Daenerys’ dickless soldiers have had little to do since they arrived", she said brightly. "Surely they will be coming with you?"

Jon sighed.
“Aye, but they will be lagging far behind”, he replied. “There’s precious little time to waste so we will have to go ahead on the dragons and hope that we can slow down the Others until the Unsullied are able to catch up”.

That could take weeks, thought Val desperately. She caught herself shaking her head but stopped when she heard Satin clear his throat.

“Jon”, said Satin, “take me with you. You’ll need more than a crippled boy and a girl at your back”. Jon hesitated before finally nodding and proffering his hand.

As Satin took his hand, Jon felt a slight buzzing in his head, like a wasp trapped in a burlap sack. His heartbeat had quickened and his stomach had rushed up as if he was falling. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. When he opened then again he could see Satin’s brow furrowed with concern. Jon mustered up what he hoped was a reassuring smile before rising to his feet. He leaned down to bestow one final kiss on Val’s cheek and bade her to remain at rest while they prepared to leave.

“Come, brother”, said Jon to Satin, clapping him on the back. “You may help me ready the dragons”.

Within a couple of hours the falling snow had finally abated enough for flight to be possible. Satin sheathed the Valyrian steel knife that had been gifted to him by Arya before clambering on to Morningstar’s back and sitting behind Jon. The ground loomed far below as the dragon rose into the sky, its leathery wings beating smoothly and rhythmically in the frosty air. The wind was a sharp knife, even through all the layers of Jon’s clothing, but the snow no longer stung his cheeks. He felt Satin’s arms tight around his waist as they flew higher, watching the stars grow brighter as Winterfell shrank into the darkness below. Jon reckoned he knew how Satin was feeling at this moment, as if there was little to hold him back from plummeting to the ground. With his first flight, Jon often pictured himself falling, arms in a frantic wave, the world coming upon him fast until he smashed upon it. But now he no longer dwelt upon it, instead choosing to focus on the impending mission. He tilted his head to one side to call out some final instructions to Satin.

“You might feel a great pressure building in your ears…pain that can drive you to the brink of madness”, he shouted. “Just keep swallowing until you feel a pop in your head”.

He could feel Satin’s grip tighten in response.

Jon kept his eyes trained on the large shadowy creature winging its way just ahead of them, Bran strapped to its back and Meera’s arms wrapped around him. If I live through this day, thought Jon, I will always pay attention to the tickle of dryness at the back of my throat at this moment, the feeling of a bad headache coming on as the memory of the red woman’s urgent whispers still burned in his ears.

“Please heed my warning, Jon Snow. The Others will see you as more than just the enemy. They will see you as an abomination…a child of two blood lines that have never been joined before”, she said, cornering him just as he shouldered his pack of obsidian weapons. “If they take you the end will not come swiftly…the Great Other will want your death to be slow and painful”.

His eyes strayed to the desolate landscape below. Dark shapes raced across the snow and he knew that a pack of wolves was on the hunt, their voices travelling easily in the frozen air. For a few seconds he panted along with them, calling out to them as they picked up the scent of a deer frantically trying to stay ahead of the pack. He bared his teeth and then reached down to pull the scarf up over his face until only his eyes remained uncovered. It had become almost unbearably cold, to the point where Jon felt like his skin was on fire, like being boiled in a pot. Only one thing was
more painful than these early minutes of freezing and it was the process of thawing out with every
fibre of his body screaming out for the agony to stop. He could feel Satin violently shaking behind
him and he knew that he, too, would soon be experiencing the sharp stabs of pain in the forehead
that would travel deeper until he felt like the inside of his skull was being prodded by fish spines. But
then the warmth would slowly creep back again. The fingers and toes would cease their burning. A
sense of relief, if not comfort, would overtake his entire body as his breathing became more laboured.
Jon twisted his head to one side and lowered his scarf for an instant.

“Try to stay awake”, he cautioned Satin. “If you give in to sleep in this kind of weather then you risk
freezing to death”.

He felt Satin tug on his cloak, wrapping it even tighter around his body. Jon raised his scarf once
more.

“I’ve never felt such cold before”, Satin shouted through chattering teeth. “I thought all those long
nights spending watch on the Wall were bitter enough”.

Jon urged Morningstar to let out gentle puffs of flame to provide a bit of fleeting warmth and to light
up the black sky. Jon could see the landscape below had changed. The snow had become patchier
and the air warmer. The vast forests of pine and spruce had given way to ash and maple, now
denuded of their colourful foliage. Jon was stretching his neck to see even further when he noticed
Meera raise her arm and point to the right.

“Fuck”, he muttered and he felt Satin’s grip tighten.

A cold, icy mist wasn’t just drifting from the ground, it was barreling towards them. Within seconds
they were engulfed in a grey shroud that swirled around them. He had lost all sense of Bran and
Meera and he hoped to all the gods that Rhaegal would make it safely to ground. He could feel the
icy wetness seeping into his bones, making him feel heavy with it. He took in a deep breath and
summoned fire from his belly, sending forth a stream of flame from his engorged throat. But the fire
failed to penetrate the dense fog that surrounded them.

“Bran”, he roared over and over again but to no avail.

His hands had become numb so that he could no longer feel his fingers as he tried to lower the wet
wool from around his mouth.

“We’re going to have find somewhere to set down”, shouted Jon to Satin. “The dragon is disoriented
and I can’t see a damn thing”.

It came like a bolt of lightning out of the sky, a blinding blue mass that hissed as it streaked past
them. Morningstar screeched and reared in mid flight. Jon struggled to maintain control of the beast
while Satin shouted and pointed to some movement through the mist, something advancing toward
them. Jon flared his nostrils for any warning scent but it was too late. He heard a roar followed by
another blast of blue flame and then nothing but searing pain that washed over him in waves. He
slumped forward. His blood was pounding in his skull and he was dimly aware that Satin was no
longer clutching at his shoulders. Satin was gone.

They were in freefall. Morningstar groaned and emitted feeble puffs of smoke. Then it scrabbled
briefly at the air before going still and silent. Jon clung to the dragon’s back, the wind screaming in
his ears. He tried to slip under the skin of the dragon but was instantly repelled. He clung to its scaly
neck, his breath coming in short spurts, as he calculated his next move. The dragon was gone now,
its wings drifting aimlessly in the icy breeze, a dead weight that was rapidly picking up speed in its
descent towards the ground. He briefly debated abandoning the dragon and jumping into the grey
void. But he instantly dismissed this as foolhardy and he braced himself for impact, praying that the dragon’s body would absorb most of the shock of hitting the ground.

They slowed as he hit the treetops. Limbs snapped and crashed as they fell through the canopy. Jon struggled to hang on as he found himself sliding off the dragon’s back. He smashed his face so hard against a branch that the spine of nose popped and warm blood trickled over his lips. Another struck the top of his head so that his eyes went dim and he knew he was losing consciousness. He wrapped his arms around the base of the dragon’s neck and uttered a few words in prayer before he blacked out.

When he awoke in the darkness to a cold, hard wind sweeping across the ice, he almost wished he hadn’t. He had been dreaming...of Val cooing to a newborn babe wrapped in her arms, sunlight glinting in her hair; of Ghost racing across a tundra scattered with snow, chasing a snowshoe hare that was bold enough to venture from its den; of Arya clacking wooden swords with Rickon in a muddy pen while Sansa perched on the nearby fence, a bemused expression upon her face. Dreams of hope...dreams of spring, he thought wistfully.

He was sprawled close to the frozen water’s edge. Morningstar lay crumpled a few feet away. The mist had cleared and Jon could see that so much blood, black in the moonlight, had pooled over the flat rocks beneath the dragon’s body. He sat up slowly and tried to will his hands to stop shaking so he could probe his body for injuries. Satisfied that he managed to escape with only bruises and gashes he staggered to his feet and began collecting branches and twigs. Within a few minutes he had stripped the dead body of his saddle and packs and arranged the debris around the dragon. After a few strikes of his flint, he stepped back as the fire caught.

The eyes of the dragon had already changed to the colour of clouds before a rain and had sunk into its great skull. Jon watched how the large talons clenched like fists as the muscles dried out from the heat. Then the flames leapt up the sides, poking holes in the skin, eating away at the flesh and within minutes the whole body was consumed by fire.

“You were born from fire and now I return you to fire”, murmured Jon.

His eyes searched the shadows beyond the ring of flame while he listened intently. A cloud of smoke enveloped his head and he waved it away impatiently as he searched the nearby trees for clues. Several paths had been trampled into the bush but one appeared to be more open than the others. I may regret this, he thought as he lifted his pack on to his shoulders before plunging into the woods. He tried to walk quietly but still stumbled through the thick, overgrown brush and tripped over the fallen trees in the snow. Occasionally he would pause and prick up his ears, listening for signs of his companions. But all he heard were the caws of crows as they congregated in the trees far above his head.

He had stopped to free his cloak which had become snagged on the branch of an elderberry bush when he heard the snap of some twigs underfoot. He raised his head and took a swift intake of breath, letting it out slowly when he saw someone standing a few feet away in the middle of the path. Jon’s first thought was that it might be Bran. But then he quickly corrected himself...barring a miracle it couldn’t possibly be him. His heart began to quicken as he fingered the pommel on Longclaw.

“Who are you?” he called out.

The stranger silently showed his empty hands and moved slowly towards Jon. Moonlight was spilling from between the branches of the trees, creating shadows that danced on the glistening snow. The stranger halted in a spot where the light was strongest. Although much of his face remained in shadow, Jon could still make out that he was an older man.
“I’m not here to harm you”, said the stranger. “We’ve been waiting for you, Jon Snow”.

Jon startled to hear his name spoken. The cold air had shifted just enough to cause the hair on the back of his neck to rise up.

“Who are you?” Jon asked again, more forcefully this time.

The stranger lowered his hands to his sides.

“I’m Howland Reed, son”, he replied.
Chapter 26

Jon reached up to pull his hood tighter around his face. He could barely make out the little crannogman who trudged ahead of him. At times Jon had to rely on his hearing, listening for the crunch of Howland’s boots as they broke through the icy crust of snow. Jon lowered his scarf for a brief moment.

“How much further?” he shouted.

Howland paused and turned, raising a solitary finger to his lips before pointing to a spot amongst the sleeping trees. Jon could see a hazy yellow glow close by. He nodded, tugged his scarf up and kept his tongue.

As they plunged into the heavy underbrush, Jon swore under his breath as the toe of his boot got hung up on some fallen branches, nearly causing him to fall headlong into the snow. Howland caught his arm just in time and hung on until Jon could regain his footing. After a few more steps, he was startled to hear an owl hooting nearby. He stopped to listen, his heart swelling with hope that maybe it was Bran trying to call out to him. It was then that he noticed loud cracking noises, thumping and an eerie kind of singing coming from beyond the water’s edge.

“The ice is getting stronger”, muttered Howland as he tugged on Jon’s arm. “They’ll be crossing soon”.

Jon whirled to face him.

“And then what?” hissed Jon angrily. “My dragon is dead. My companions are lost. There is another fearsome creature that roams the skies breathing blue flames. And where are your men? Without them we are lost, destined to become fodder for their army of the undead”.

There was a brief silence before Howland answered him.

“The Green Men will help us”, he replied.

Jon knew little of the Green Men other than what he remembered from Old Nan’s stories. They were men, clothed in green robes, who had been entrusted with the guardianship of the Isle of Faces. The gods save us, thought an exasperated Jon. A monastic order of men was all that stood between them and oblivion… much like the Night’s Watch. And look how that turned out, he thought with an audible sigh.

The scent of death caught his nose as he nudged with his foot the remains of a deer carcass half buried under the snow. There wasn’t much of it left, just a few bones and tufts of fur. Wolves, he thought. Once their bellies are so full that they can scarce move, they drag what’s left deep into the bush to get away from areas that smell of man and fire. Wolves can’t live on twigs and berries. They must always be hunting. Jon bent down to pluck at a piece of fur and let the wind take it away. I must always be a wolf, he whispered beneath his breath. I must never allow myself to become a deer.

They stumbled on through the woods, heading towards the campfire that burned like a beacon in the night. They drew closer like moths to a flame until they found themselves in a small clearing. Jon’s eyes darted about as he sensed they were being watched. Within seconds he could see small hooded figures emerging from the shadows. He felt his chest tighten as he reached up to grab his sword, stopping only when Howland seized his arm and shook his head.

“No, son”, he whispered. “That won’t be necessary”.

Jon faltered for a second before lowering his hand. As they men moved closer, the fire illuminated their green roughspun robes. To his disappointment they did not wear antlers on their heads. No doubt that was just one of Old Nan’s embellishments, thought Jon. He let out his breath slowly and allowed the tension in his back to ease a little.

Howland greeted the men solemnly. One of the men stepped forward and, without warning, grasped Jon’s chin and twisted it so that the light of the fire shone directly on Jon’s face. Jon instantly batted the man’s hand away and took a step back. The man stood stock still, silently assessing Jon.

“Are you sure it’s him?” the man asked as he turned towards Howland. “He don’t look much like his father”.

Jon bit back a retort that he did indeed resemble his father when it dawned on him that the hooded man meant Rhaegar Targaryen.

“Aye”, said Howland, his voice tinged with sadness. “He favours his mother…but it’s him all right”.

Jon could feel his impatience welling up inside, eager to dispense with this seemingly fruitless conversation regarding his identity when he began to shiver violently. He coughed and his breath billowed into the air in great puffs that encircled his head like a wreath. The cold had become so bitter that he could swear he heard the trees moaning in pain.

The Green Men drew closer together, muttering words that Jon didn’t understand. Long, icy fingers of mist crept out from between the trees, slowly encircling them. Jon’s own half-frozen fingers fumbled as he tried to pull Longclaw from his back. He could hear little but the blood singing in his ears and his heart thumping in his chest.

“Jon…Jon”, said Howland. “It’s time”.

Jon turned to older man.

“How for what exactly?” asked Jon.

Howland shook his head and raised a hand to Jon’s cheek.

“I’m sorry, Jon”, whispered the crannogman. “It’s for the best”.

Jon stared back at him in confusion. It was no more than a pinprick, a quick jab. But when he touched his cheek he discovered blood on the fingertips of his glove. He opened his mouth to demand an answer but his words were strangled in his throat. He tried to reach out to Howland but his arms felt like they were tethered to the ground with heavy irons. He attempted to take a step but ended up sagging against the older man before collapsing into his arms.

“The first time I held you you were but a wee babe”, said Howland whispering into his ear as he cradled Jon tightly, “right after we lost dear sweet Lya”.

Those were the last words Jon heard before his world fell dark and silent.

Jon awoke. He could taste blood and realized that he had bitten his swollen tongue. He spat and tried to move but his body was still seized. He could hear whispering but he couldn’t decipher their rushed speech. At times it sounded like the cracking of ice, harsh and discordant. He raised his head and peered into the darkness. He blinked rapidly trying to bring the scene before him into focus. Pale creatures stood before him and he knew who they were…Craster’s sons…Gilly’s brothers. Tall, slender and otherworldly…Jon would almost describe them as beautiful if they weren’t so terrifying. They watched him intently with their piercing blue eyes, altered states of the warm-blooded men they
were meant to be.

He could feel the numbness in his body begin to recede. To his horror, he discovered that his arms were outstretched and bound tightly at the wrists to the lower limbs of a weirwood tree. Its red leaves shivered in the breeze while his feet felt tethered to its roots. Three of the Others moved closer. Two of them flashed their teeth as they jeered at him. The third regarded him silently. He didn’t resemble the other two as closely…his face longer and his demeanour solemn. For a brief moment he laid an icy finger on Jon’s cheek. Jon shrank away from him, his nostrils flaring and snorting out white puffs of air. Something cold clutched at his heart…and then it was gone. The tingling in his head lingered as he watched the silent Other slowly disappear into the darkness.

Of the two Others that remained, one brandished a knife that glistened in the moonlight. He waved it in front of Jon’s face. For a second Jon felt as if his head had been shoved under water. He stared at the Other, struggling and gasping for breath. The Other looked back at him blankly, watching him drown. Then he thrust the knife into Jon’s side and twisted it. A rush of cold air filled Jon’s lungs and he howled for a second or two. Then he dropped his voice to barely above a whisper as he made an entreaty to the Old Gods.

“I believe that I have seen the last time that the sun will rise upon this world and I pray that you will help me be strong enough to accept with dignity the pain I’m about to endure”, he murmured. “For this, I will be grateful.”

He gritted his teeth as his tormentor poked and prodded at his gaping wound. His warm blood trickled down his leg, pooling around his ankle and dripping into the snow around the roots of the tree. Then he sensed the tree begin to stir. A warm wind passed over his face and he heard somebody whisper his name. Either I’ve become delirious, he thought, or this tree is awakening. He heard the tree groan and swell as if taking a deep breath. It pressed against Jon’s back and he felt his bonds loosen. He felt momentary elation when he felt the cold steel of Longclaw bite into his neck. But the moment quickly passed when one of the Others threw a body down at his feet.

As Jon surreptitiously slid his hands from his bonds, the man who sprawled before him on the snow began to stir. One of the Others straddled the man and pulled back his head so that his neck was exposed. Bile rose into Jon’s throat when he saw Satin’s battered face. He tensed up, rapidly calculating how fast he could move to save his friend. Then, in the blink of an eye, he saw Satin’s hand move, there was a glint of light and then the Other shattered into a thousand tiny glowing crystals that danced briefly in the air before falling to the ground. Jon froze in astonishment. He gaped at the remains until Satin shook him out of his stupor.

“Jon”, shouted Satin. “Longclaw”.

Jon reached behind his back and pulled out his bastard sword. In one fell swoop he struck at the Other who lunged at him, ice dagger in hand. He smashed the creature as if it was a delicate pane of glass.

Satin staggered to his feet. His left arm was hanging limply by his side and he winced in pain as he gestured with his good arm for Jon to follow him. They fled into the deep bush with the Others in hot pursuit. Gathering just inside the forest could see shadows lurking amongst the trees. Satin barked out orders for the men to take cover. They immediately scrambled nimbly up the trees, bows slung over their shoulders and quivers of arrows clinking on their backs. Jon and Satin ran deeper into the woods until Satin dragged Jon into a low shelter.

“We need to bind your wound”, said Satin hastily as he fumbled in the pouch at his hip and produced a length of gauze. Flickers of pain passed over his face and Jon could see that either Satin had either broken his left arm or his shoulder was severly dislocated. He gently took the gauze from
Satin’s hands.

“Sit back, dear friend”, he said. “I can handle this myself”.

While Satin slumped gratefully against a rock, Jon smeared some honey on his weeping wound before sealing it off with the gauze. Then he removed his scarf. As he wound the wool around his waist, he quizzed Satin.

“What happened back there?” asked Jon. “Who are those men?”

Satin’s eyes were closed, his voice weary.

“Valyrian steel…tis the death of them”, he replied. “And those men are crannogmen. They came with Lord Reed”.

Jon grimaced. He had a lot of questions for Lord Reed.

“Was it truly his intention to let those monsters kill me?” he asked.

Satin was silent for a few seconds before opening his eyes.

“I…I don’t know”, he replied. “I just know that I wasn’t prepared to let you be sacrificed. And, neither, it seems were the Old Gods”.

Sacrifice, thought Jon…is that what I was meant to be? But the time for reflection vanished when they sound of shouting coming towards them. Once more they were on the move, retreating further into the dense forest.

For what seemed like hours they fought small pitched battles. Some of the archers took shelter in the trees while the majority moved slowly on foot trying to outsmart the enemy. The cries of two or three men meeting one another echoed out from the forest every now, everyone to tense up a few seconds wondering if it was friend or foe. During this game of cat and mouse Jon and Satin stayed close, never losing sight of each other. Eventually they became separated from the crannogmen and found themselves near a creek which ran into the lake, well away from where the violence began. They immediately sought shelter and crouched down.

Blood had seeped through the field dressing. While Jon applied pressure to the wound, Satin removed his scarf and offered it to him.

“This is ridiculous”, said Jon as he tied it in place. “Eventually they’re going to pin us down and slaughter us all. We can’t continue like this for much longer. Please tell me the Crown is sending us reinforcements”.

“I don’t know if it will be the Crown”, replied Satin looking about anxiously. “But…”

His voice trailed off and he looked up. Jon’s eyes followed Satin’s, seeing at first what appeared to be lightning flashing in the sky punctuated by a thunderous roar. Jon slowly rose to his feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in his side.

“Drogon”, he whispered excitedly.

Jon and Satin cautiously advanced closer to the lake’s edge, taking care to not attract the attention of the wights. They cheered silently as they watched the dragon lay down an unbroken stream of fire, setting untold numbers of wights ablaze. The beach was on fire in front of them, littered with burning bodies that twisted grotesquely as they fell to the ground. Jon and Satin pinched their noses when smell of burning, rotting flesh wafted towards them. They pushed aside one blackened corpse with
its rib cage missing on one side, its features vacant. Another displayed a pale unblemished face turned up to the moon. But when Jon nudged it with his foot, its head lolled to one side, revealing the ragged edges of the back of its skull from which the remains of its brain were spilling on to the snow.

Again and again they watched Drogon unleash blasts of flame until they heard the ice on the lake begin to groan and crack. Weakened by the onslaught of heat and the weight of the wights, the ice covering the lake began to split apart, allowing the water to suck the dead creatures into its murky depths.

At times they caught glimpses of Daenerys, a tiny figure mounted on Drogon’s back, her silvery hair gleaming in the moonlight. Jon longed to be flanking her, seated on Morningstar’s back, blasting the dead back to their underground kingdom. Instead he was forced to watch helplessly from the ground, his fists balled up in frustration.

Satin pointed up to the sky. In the distance, Jon could hear the sound of screeching. He and Satin strained to determine which direction it was coming from, ready to bound away for cover.

“There is another”, shouted Satin and Jon could see the flash of blue flame. His heart sank and he grabbed Satin’s good arm, dragging him to an overhang of rocks.

“A dragon”, muttered Jon darkly as the outline of the blue flame breathing creature became apparent.

So, he concluded, either the Others possessed their own dragon or they had resurrected one of Daenerys’ dragons. Jon suspected the latter over the former, wondering which one had initially been lost…Rhaegal or Viserion.

The two dragons swooped and fired at each other, chasing one another in circles and dives. Orange and blue flames swirled about, lighting up the black sky and choking the air with heavy smoke. Their roars echoed around the lake.

The sight and sound of the two dragons battling in the dark sky was bound to attract attention. Scores of crannogmen slipped out from between the trees, betrayed only by the snap of a twig and the crunch of snow. They crept up on Jon and Satin and stood silently, all eyes heavenward, awestruck by the spectacle being carried out before them. Jon tensed up when he shifted his gaze towards the shoreline.

“Get ready”, he muttered, “pass it on”.

The water’s edge was crawling with wights working their way inland. Daenerys was too preoccupied to stop the undead horde from moving towards them. As the enemy drew closer, Jon could hear the archers making ready.

He flexed his sword hand before taking up Longclaw. He was wound tight as a hare until he could smell them…smell their decaying bones…smell their rotting flesh. And it made him hungry.

They attacked with all the frenzy of a wolf pack, driving the wights back, surrounding them and biting pieces out of them with their obsidian headed warhammers, knives and flails while arrows flew overhead.

Two wights attacked Satin. Jon lunged at one of them, hacking away at it until was nothing but pieces of gristle. The other one glanced at Jon before Satin split its skull with a slash of his knife. They heard shouting over the din and saw several wights raining down blows on one of the crannogmen. By the time they reached him, he was on his knees, his face covered in blood. Jon screamed and rushed the wights, stabbing and slicing, his sword a blur as two and then three fell to
the ground. But the other wights kept swinging down on the crannogman till Jon could see, as he sliced off their heads, that the small man lay flat on the ground bleeding into the snow. While Jon bent down to pull the crannogman to safety, Satin turned at the approach of another wight, running at him. Satin ducked the wight’s swing and split open its belly with his knife.

Jon dragged the crannogman towards the line of archers. But before he could reach them another wight ran at him, both hands raising a club. Jon slashed at it but missed. The wight was bringing down the full weight of the club when the injured crannogman flew onto it, knocking it over. Then he rolled on the ground with the wight, slipped around to its back, took out a knife and slit the wight’s throat.

“There”, panted the crannogman before collapsing on to the ground, “we’re even”.

It was Howland Reed.

Jon’s spine ignited. He hauled Howland to his feet and pulled him close, snorting hot breath over the smaller man’s blood-streaked face.

“In no way are we even…what the fuck were you playing at turning me over to those monsters?” snarled Jon.

Howland sagged as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Please put me down, Jon, and I’ll explain”, he replied.

Jon glanced at Satin who nodded. Then he swallowed his anger and loosened his grip on the older man. Between them they half dragged Howland to safety before depositing him beneath a weirwood. He waved off the other crannogmen who flew to assist him, insisting that he was all right, that the wounds were merely superficial. Then he suddenly clutched at Jon’s arm and pointed at the sky.

“Another has joined the fray”, he cried.

The noise overhead had intensified. Through the smoke and flames Jon could just make out the outline of a third dragon. He slid down next to Howland. His limbs were stiff with fatigue, dragged down by an aching heaviness like gravity. But his mind remained clear and the images of the past few hours burned in his consciousness with startling clarity.

“Was I supposed to die to appease them?” asked Jon. “Are they some kind of gods?”

Howland turned his face from the sky.

“No, lad”, he replied simply.

Satin was hovering over Jon’s shoulder, fingering his knife nervously. Jon could feel his impatience rising.

“He did it to buy us time”, broke in a familiar voice.

Meera knelt down next to her father, scolding him for not having his wounds attended to. He tried to shoo her away.

“There’s nowt but scrapes and bruises”, he protested.

“I’ll be the judge of that”, she muttered.

As she fussed over Howland, Meera rapidly told Jon and Satin what had transpired. She and Bran
had witnessed the attack and downing of Morningstar. After they landed safely on the island, Bran sent Meera to seek out her father while he flew off to find Daenerys.

“She was preparing to lay siege to Kings Landing”, said Meera. “She hesitated at first because she only had the one dragon left…Drogon”.

“And…Viserion…and Lord Tyrion?” asked Jon, anxiety creeping into his voice.

Meera shrugged and shook her head.

“Lord Tyrion was safe, according to Bran”, she replied. “He was busy making preparations alongside Ser Barristan. But of Viserion he did not say”.

Jon stared at the sky, watching the shadows of the three dragons locked in their dance of death.

“Bran needs to speak with you”, said Meera.

Jon expressed surprise.

“But…I thought”, he began.

Meera shook her head.

“No, he’s not up there…he’s down there”, she said, pointing at the roots of the tree.

Night swallowed them as she led them down a narrow path towards the frozen creek. The sound of the battle which had raged all around them gradually receded. For a moment Jon feels a little ball of panic in his belly as the sounds of the wings of the birds rustling and pecking and feeding in the nearby trees suddenly became the sound of the Others creeping ever closer, ready to impale him in the back. He stiffened his spine and felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. We must always be the hunter, never the hunted, he reminded himself…this is the only way we will survive. We must turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival.

They tread along the slippery rocks next to the creek more slowly, listening to the noise in the distance, watching the flashes of fire illuminating the sky. Jon’s eyes had adjusted to what little light there was. Their breathing was the only sound that echoed when they finally stopped. Meera stooped down to brush away some snow and dead undergrowth to reveal a small, dark opening in the ground at the base of a ridge.

“Follow me”, she commanded them as she crawled through the opening.

Jon turned to Satin.

“T’would be best if you stayed here to guard the entrance”, he said quietly.

Satin nodded and pulled his cape closer. Jon took in a gulp of air before crawling in after her. The muddy tunnel was bone-chillingly cold, pockmarked with puddles of stinking water that suggested bodies rotting at their bottom. Jon crawled on his hands and knees until Meera stopped and slowly began to rise. He stood up behind her and bumped his head on the ceiling of the tunnel. He could just make out a faint light glowing from beyond a bend and continued to follow her until they reached a larger opening that led to cavern deep beneath the trees.

The cavern walls were lined with phosphorous that emitted an eerie white light.

“Light-Bearer”, murmured Jon, recalling the more common name for the mineral.
At the center of the cavern sat Bran, en-coiled in the roots of the trees that plunged deep into the earth. Jon strode towards him but stopped when he could tell from Bran’s body that he needed to be alone. His eyes were heavenward and his hands were resting on the roots that dangled from the ceiling. Meera, accustomed to Bran’s state while receiving visions, had moved off to one side to build up the small fire that burned. As she poked the fire with a long stick, Jon waited silently for a couple of minutes for Bran to acknowledge his presence before finally losing patience.

“Bran”, he called out sharply.

The boy stirred and slowly turned towards Jon. He refocused his eyes and smiled.

“Jon”, he said. “Sorry…the visions…sometimes they can be all consuming. The light goes soft, my fingers and toes begin to tingle and then I am…lost”.

Jon took a step closer.

“What is it that you need to tell me?” he asked.

Bran lowered his arms to his side.

“That you will meet him on the field of battle, the one who was once a Stark. That he knows who you are…and that you are the one who will end it all once and forever more”, he said.

Jon stared at Bran in confusion.

“I…I don’t understand. Are you…are you saying that one of those creatures is our kin?” stammered Jon.

Bran nodded solemnly.

“He was the first…and he will be the last”, he replied.

Jon felt a slight buzz in his head and he reached out to brace a hand on a nearby wall. The wall was slick with water that pooled around fingers and dripped down his sleeve.

“Tell me what I need to know”, he said wearily.

Bran beckoned to him to sit with him by the fire. As Jon reached out to warm and dry his hands, Bran began to piece together his visions.

“After the pact was made between the First Men and the Children of the Forest, the Children still feared the encroachment of men. So they created a powerful Other using a blood magic ritual that ended with plunging obsidian into the heart of a human being. T’was cruel fate, to be sure…they became little more than a slave army, much as Daenerys’ famed Unsullied. As other victims fell to the same fate, the Children slowly began amassing a disciplined army with a single purpose which could repel and destroy the realms of men if called upon. But at some point in time the Children lost control of their creations. Something, or someone, set them free”, explained Bran.

Jon shifted uncomfortably.

“And now?” said Jon.

“Revenge sits like a black stone within their chests. They have been isolated in their chilly hermit kingdom, plotting revenge upon those who enslaved them, who hated them and who now feared them. They have been nurturing their hatred for the Children…and, to a lesser degree, for us…for
generations. The children created them to destroy us with little or no compunction. It is imprinted on their dark souls. And now, with the longest winter predicted to last many years, they have come south to exact that revenge”, said Bran.

Jon leaned forward, the fire throwing his facial features in high relief.

“The Children are all dead…they’re chasing ghosts”, he said.

Bran glanced slyly at Meera.

“Are they really dead…or have they simply evolved beyond what the Others remember of their former masters?” he replied.

Jon looked startled and turned to Meera. She kept her eyes downcast, prodding the embers of the fire with her stick.

“Aye”, she said when she finally responded. “The crannog people are descendants of the Children… as are the Green Men”.

She glanced up.

“We have tried to keep their legacy alive…we have been the guardians of the forests…we have passed on the greensight…we are the keepers of the old ways”, she added. “The Others have come for us. They want to right a wrong and so do we…and that is why we must fight”.

Bran reached out to take Jon’s hand.

“Dragonfire will decimate the wights but it is ineffective against the Others. Lord Reed and his troops will continue to battle valiantly but there won’t be enough weaponry to stop them all. It will become a war of attrition that we will inevitably lose. Only you can finish this”, said Bran, his grip like a steel trap.

Jon winced slightly.

“And what part do I play in this drama?” he asked.

For the first time he saw Bran’s certainty falter. He shifted his gaze away from Jon’s prying eyes and it was then that Jon knew the truth.

“You don’t know…do you”, said Jon, his tone accusatory.

He stood up, towering over Bran.

“Bran, you say I’m the key to ending this war and yet you haven’t a clue as to what I’m supposed to do”, said Jon in exasperation.

A guilty look flitted across Bran’s face.

“I…I have been searching for the vision that will show me what must be done but I confess I have been unable to find it”, he cried. “I have appealed to the Old Gods for help and they have been silent. They are either unwilling or unable to show me what must be”.

His voice trailed off and he stared at the dark recesses of the cavern.

“Then how can you be sure that I will be the one?” asked Jon.
Bran turned back to him.

“You were created to fulfill a prophecy”, he said urgently. “You are an outlier, an abomination, if you will…a child of ice and fire…two contradictory elements bound up in one person. But your final act will restore balance to a world that has slowly become undone. They know the prophecy…they have been searching for you since your birth. When you were trussed up to that tree, they looked deep into your soul and they knew that you were the one they had been seeking…the one who could bring them all down”.

Jon folded his arms and stared moodily into the fire. He did not want to believe in this prophecy. He did not want to believe that somehow his life had been predetermined by some unknown gods pulling his strings.

“Is that really the sum total of my existence?” he asked coldly. “If so then my life is not so different from those frigid bastards”.

He swore under his breath. He already felt defeated.

“Since it has already been ordained then I guess it’s time for me to set forth and fulfill my destiny”, he said.

Bran offered him a wry smile.

“Destiny is a matter of choice, Jon”, he reminded him gently. “Your fate still remains an unknown”.

Jon fastened his cape and pulled on his gloves.

“You’re splitting hairs, Bran”, he growled. “Do me a favour then…don’t tell when I’m going to die”.
Val let out an anguished cry before falling back against the pillows. Gilly pushed Val’s damp hair off her forehead before dabbing at it gently with a rag.

“Remember, it’s not a race”, murmured Gilly.

Val panted slowly. Then she licked her lips.

‘Water’, she croaked.

Gilly rose to her feet and crossed over to retrieve the pewter pitcher. She filled a goblet with water and returned to the Val’s side.

“If you drink it too fast you’ll likely retch”, admonished Gilly as she watched Val down the contents of the cup greedily.

“Don’t care”, said Val with a gasp before relinquishing the cup to Gilly.

Within seconds Val felt her belly roiling and she turned her head to empty the contents of her stomach into the washbasin located strategically on the floor next to the bed. She ignored Gilly’s look of “I told you so” by focusing on a damp patch between the wooden trestles above her head.

She had tried to will away the pain because she knew it was too early. But when she couldn’t any longer she found Gilly to tell her that she thought the time must be coming. At first she paced about the room and occasionally drifted into the corridors, hoping to walk away the discomfort and boredom. But as soon as the pains began shooting through her in earnest she could only beg for the boredom to return. Gilly prepared willowbark tea to help ease the worst of her suffering and sat doggedly by her side, speaking words of encouragement. At times Sam would loom into view, his normally open genial face tight with worry. He and Gilly would whisper to each other out of earshot. Val had lost count of the number hours she had been labouring and she knew when they turned their eyes to her that this was a source of concern.

She closed her eyes and silently counted as the pain intensified once more, squeezing her until she could barely breathe. Then she let out a long, guttural scream, doubling over while Gilly rubbed her back and made soothing noises. When the pain receded to the point where she felt she could stand up, she threw back the furs.

“I need to make water”, announced Val. “And I don’t want to use the basin”.

Gilly accompanied her to the privy. She waited just outside the door as Val gingerly lowered herself on to the wooden seat. She leaned forward, resting her forearms on her thighs, praying fervently that this ordeal would soon end. When she stood again she felt a shooting pain far worse than any before and cried out for Gilly who rushed in to grab her before she fell to the floor. Val felt a warm trickle of what she feared was blood running down her legs. She reached down and touched it, smeared it between her fingers and raised them to her face. Then she let out a slow breath. Praise be to the Old Gods, she thought, the liquid was clear.

Gilly’s smile was one of relief.

“Your water has finally broken”, she said as she stooped down. “It shouldn’t be long now”.

Val nearly wept with joy when her son roared upon taking his first breath. When she placed the
boy’s mouth to her nipple for the first time, she felt a small shock. We two are one again, she marvelled, as she nuzzled his thatch of dark brown hair. She nursed him silently, letting the pain of the past many hours slide away like the spring snow from a cottage roof. She leaned down and kissed the top of his head as he lapped at her breast. She was in awe of how perfect he was, this little being that she and Jon had created, and aware that she was already falling deeply in love once more.

She didn’t hear the door open until the rustling of Gilly’s skirt alerted Val to her presence. She sat down by Val’s side.

“Will you name him?” asked Gilly.

Val looked uncertain. Gilly leaned in closer and placed a gentle hand on the baby’s back.

“We may not have much time left”, she said solemnly. “Sam says the ravens go unanswered. For all we know we are completely overrun, with nowhere to hide. T’would be a shame to let this little one die nameless”.

Val lifted her chin, a defiant gleam in her eye.

“I have to believe our time is not over yet”, she said.

Then she glanced down at her son.

“Little Dragon”, she murmured. “I shall call him Little Dragon until his name day… two years hence”.

With the dreadful screams still ringing in his ears, Jon fought his way alone to the top of a ridge. He stared helplessly as the twin fireballs plummeted towards the lake. They crashed through the ice, sending up a fountain of water of inky water that hissed as it licked at the flaming corpses of the two dead dragons. Only one remained, silhouetted against the silvery moon. As Drogon circled over the open water where its brothers had fallen, it unleashed a torrent of mournful roars that echoed around the lake.

The north wind was blowing relentlessly. Jon turned his face away from the stinging ice rain that was turning into driving snow. He leaned down to recover his breath. His wounded side throbbed and his sword arm ached. He had been fighting for what felt like a lifetime, striking out again and again at the neverending stream of undead that threw themselves at him. The field of battle burned with a thousand small fires that threatened to choke him as the smoke rolled across the ground before climbing into the sky. Above the din of battle he could hear the shrieks and cries of the dragons as brother was pitted against brother in an aerial display that hadn’t been witnessed for generations.

He was trying not to give in to despair as he glanced at the battle that raged just below the ridge. The death of yet another dragon was a huge blow to their side. He wasn’t sure if one dragon was enough to turn the tide of battle. One well aimed spear or arrow could turn the tide once and for all.

He startled when he heard a rush of birds take to the sky. He whirled around and for a second or two he could feel soft wings beating against his cheek. And then the sensation was lost.

His ears pricked up when felt an icy feeling on the back of his neck. He spun around and froze in place when he spied the tall, pale creature standing a few feet away. The Other was accompanied by a white direwolf, grievously wounded in a previous life, its blue eyes as piercing as its companion. Jon felt icy fingers clutch at his heart as he wondered for a beat or two if this might be Ghost. But then reason took hold when he realized that there hadn’t been time for his direwolf to travel such a distance. The direwolf bared its teeth when the Other began to advance on Jon.
He struck out almost immediately; swinging Longclaw and hearing it clang as it struck at the Other’s icy sword. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the direwolf slip around him, silently weaving like a shadow in the half moon of night. Jon felt like a young buck cornered, fearing that his fate had arrived yet preparing to fight as hard as he could before bowing to the inevitable. He quickly sidestepped the wolf and ducked as the Other thrust at him and narrowly missed him. Then the wolf grabbed hold of his sword arm, latching on to his heavy leather coat and sinking its great teeth into him. Jon cried out in pain as he felt the teeth penetrate the leather and sink into his arm. He reflexively dropped his sword and sank into snow. The Other loomed over him, poised with his icy sword hanging over Jon’s head, ready to deliver the killing blow. In desperation, Jon reached for the obsidian knife stuck in his belt. He rolled to one side, dragging the direwolf on top of him, before plunging his knife into the animal’s throat. In that split second, the Other’s sword missed him by a hair, landing instead in the direwolf’s back.

The Other threw back his head and let out a guttural cry of fury. He pulled the long sword from the direwolf’s back and slashed at Jon, blow after blow coming within inches of Jon’s upturned face as he scrambled to get out of range. His fingers touched something hard lying in the snow and he knew that he had found Longclaw. As the Other leaned in closer, Jon swung hard with Longclaw and cracked the sword across the Other’s shins, causing the creature to stumble. In that second, the blood pounding his skull, Jon slashed at the Other’s exposed belly and paused, expecting the creature to shatter into thousands of tiny shards of ice. But he didn’t. The Other looked momentarily stunned before giving Jon a hard shove, sending him tumbling precariously towards the edge of the ridge. Then the Other rose to his feet, towering over Jon, his ice sword raised above his shoulder. Jon could see his long pale face more clearly...it was the silent one whose icy fingers had probed Jon’s soul. Jon quickly rolled away but not before a glancing blow bounced off his shoulder. He grunted in pain as he staggered to his feet. Breathing hard he swung at the Other, their weapons cracking and ringing as they thrust and parried again and again.

The sky flamed orange above them as Drogon suddenly swooped down on them. It was the opening Jon needed as the Other was momentarily distracted. He drove his sword into the Other’s chest and watched him stagger backwards a few steps. Then the Other raised one hand to examine his gaping wound, a puzzled expression on his face. But he did not fall. Instead, he lunged at Jon with renewed vigour.

“What in blazes is going on here?” wondered Jon as he twisted to one side.

He quickly took a few paces back, clumsily parrying the Other’s swings. A sudden gust of cold wind climbing up his back made him realize how close he was to the edge of the ridge. His pierced side was burning and his sword arm throbbed. His blood was singing in his ears, obscuring all extraneous noise apart from the clash of swords. Then he stumbled in the deep, wet snow and fell to his knees.

The Other shouted in triumph, the sound echoing around the lake like the cracking of ice. Jon ducked to one side just as the sword swung down on him. The Other lurched forward, coming just close enough for Jon to reach up and grab his pale hauberk, before they both tumbled down the sharp embankment to the lake below. They slid to a stop just short of the edge of the ice, the Other lying a short distance away. Jon arose first, feeling the shock of snow down his back. He staggered towards his opponent, his fists at the ready, searching for a rock so he might smash the creature’s head in. Longclaw was lost, somewhere between the top of the ridge and the lake’s edge. Now all he had was his wits and his will to survive.

The Other was now on his feet, his weapon also missing. Jon stared at him, wiping away blood from his lips with the side of his gloved hand. He bared his teeth and took a few steps forward, his feet crunching on the icy surface. A bitter wind was blowing off the lake. With all the strength he had left he lunged at the enemy and they fell to the ground, grappling with each other. But his opponent was
much stronger. Jon scrabbled helplessly at the icy fingers as they wrapped around his throat. He could feel his life ebbing away as the fingers squeezed tighter. His eyes drifted shut and, in his delirium, he felt the flutter of wings once again beating against his cheek. Then he heard urgent whispering in his ear, jumbled words that made no sense until he heard the same phrase repeatedly… the heart of winter…the heart of winter. And then he knew that the gods had finally spoken to him. With one final gasp his fingers found purchase and reached into the open wound on the Other’s chest. The creature loosened its grip and tried to block Jon’s hand but it was too late. Jon felt the smooth piece of obsidian lodged in the Other’s chest and yanked it free. The Other let out an almighty screech that pierced the frozen air. Then he shattered into tiny fragments of ice that disappeared in a glittering maelstrom.

Jon sat on the bank and allowed his hands to stop shaking from the rush of the fight. A blinding flash of white light followed by a clap of thunder caused him to shield his eyes for a second or two until a gentle rain began to fall. He slowly and laboriously rose to his feet. He slipped the piece of obsidian into a pocket before turning towards the lake. He walked out a few feet on to the ice, listening as it moaned…speaking, he hoped, of the season about to come. When the ice cracked so loudly that he jumped, he realized to his surprise that it was already beginning to break up. He beat a hasty retreat to shore and stood gazing at the sky. The rain, which had turned into a warm, steady drizzle, washed his face clean. Then he began to walk, following the shoreline, unsure as to where it would lead him.

Certain that he could hear voices just up ahead, Jon picked up the pace. The sky briefly turned white once more, followed by a lightning crack that was so close by that the hair on his body stood up. The rain was falling harder now, so hard that he was forced to narrow his eyes and lower his chin to his chest. As he rounded a bend he looked up in time to see the dim outline of the dragon crouched near a marsh. A moment of sheer panic ripped through him when he saw that the dragon appeared to be motionless. But that moment turned into exhilaration once Drogon let out a gentle puff of flame, lighting up Daenerys who stood next to her dragon, stroking its scaly skin. Jon called out to her and she turned to the sound of his voice.

“Come, nephew”, she shouted when she spotted him. “See what we have wrought”.

Brambles tugged at his woolen breeches like needy children as he pushed through a thicket of thorny bushes and stumbled on to the open field. While he waded through the slushy snow he observed shadowy groups of men dragging and piling up dead bodies while others bobbed about, appearing to collect weapons that were strewn about.

Daenerys was glowing despite the soot that coated her face. Her hair, bound in a long single braid that cascaded down her back, was singed but otherwise intact. She gestured towards the field of battle.

“By all accounts the wights dropped to the ground all at once as if commanded to fall”, she said excitedly. “The Others…they just disappeared into the ether…poof”.

Jon smiled as she mimicked a conjurer completing a magic trick. Drogon snorted in apparent delight. Jon toed the ground as he summoned up some appropriate words of sympathy.

“I’m sorry for the loss of your dragons”, he mumbled.

She dipped her head and sighed deeply.

“Aye”, she responded softly,”Drogon and I are feeling their loss most keenly. They were more than just weapons of war, as you know…they were our family”.

She offered him a sad smile.
“I believe that you have also suffered the loss of a dragon”, she said.

Jon nodded solemnly. He and Morningstar were bonded more than a horse and rider. They were one when they flew into battle but he never regarded the dragon as more than just another familiar. He knew that he did not feel the dragon’s loss as keenly as did she…Jon was still more wolf than dragon.

The steady drum of the rain had been growing fainter until he realized that it had finally stopped. In the east, a faint golden glow peeked over the horizon bringing the promise of light for the first time in many moons. For the first time in a long time Jon felt such warm feeling inside, as if a coal that he thought had gone cold in the pit of his belly had been fanned and come back to life. He wanted to close his eyes and revel in it. But there was still much to do before closing the book on this chapter of their lives. He touched Daenerys’ hand.

“What will you do now?” he asked. “Will you return to Kings Landing?”

She hesitated, her eyes scanning the hillocks of bodies that were growing bigger by the minute. Then she nodded.

“I’ll mount Drogon and help burn the bodies first”, she said. “But then, yes, I must return”.

Jon was not normally a man given to act on impulse. But she had come to their aid when she could have maintained her steady march to take back the iron throne. She had believed in them so perhaps it was time to acknowledge that his fate was now inextricably bound up in hers.

“I…I should come with you”, he said suddenly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. What he proposed, she knew, was going against his better nature.

“You do realize that by joining forces with me against the Crown puts you in open rebellion…making you a traitor”, she said. “Why take the risk? Is it vengeance you seek?”

He smiled.

“Aye, once upon a time that would have been my driving motivation. But now, after all we seen and done together I can summon up my reasons for wanting to go with you in one word…family”, he replied.

He could see her eyes glisten before she turned her head away. She chewed on her lower lip for a few seconds before shaking her head.

“No”, she said quietly. “I won’t allow it.”

He opened his mouth in protest but she interrupted him.

“This is my fight, Jon Snow”, she said vehemently. “I need you to go back home. Hold the north for me. And remember…remember this day. Tell everyone what you witnessed. Tell them what I did for the good of the realm”.

She mounted Drogon and took up the reins. Then she leaned forward and blew him a kiss of farewell.

He smiled as he watched them take to the sky. Then he lowered his eyes. The earth was dark now, white snow melting into it as if to calm a fever. Jon felt like he was in that half place between two seasons, neither of them wanting to move forward or back. Through the mist was that was rising off
the snow he could see the sun slowly rising in the sky. As he pushed his way forward, he paused for a minute to observe one of Howland’s men conduct a curious ritual as he stacked the dead like cordwood. The man stared into each wight’s eyes before closing them with his calloused right hand. When Jon gently asked him what he was doing, the man muttered that it gave him a strange spark of warmth in his belly knowing that he would be the last thing they saw before their bodies were consigned to the fire, their final resting place.

Jon listened to the wind in the trees moan, making the boughs creak, as he snaked his way across the field. Then it suddenly stopped. His ears pricked up when he detected the sound of a woman keening in the near distance so he picked up his pace towards the direction of her sobs.

A clutch of men had gathered around her, providing a sort of protective circle. Jon pushed his way through and felt his heart lurch when he saw the scene before him. Meera was kneeling on the ground with Bran’s head cradled in her arms. His eyes open but unseeing. His body was limp and his limbs were splayed at odd angles. Blood oozed from the corner of his mouth.

“Bran”, croaked Jon. Hot tears splashed on to his cold cheeks at the sight of his brother’s motionless body.

Meera turned her tear streaked face towards him, her expression an odd mixture of sorrow and triumph.

“I did whatever I could to protect him”, she said, her voice quavering. “I swung my Valeryian sword as fast as I could. I dispatched many of them before they finally took him. But by then it was too late…he was gone”.

As she spoke, her eyes were fixed on the open sky where hues of pink and orange were chasing away the gloom of perpetual night. A flock of ravens called out from above, silhouetted against the rising sun. And she smiled and…waved. It was then that Jon realized what she meant.

“He’s begun his second life” said Jon hoarsely. “Did he know they would come for him?”

She nodded fiercely and wiped away some tears with the back of her hand. A man pushed his way into the circle and squatted down beside her. It was Howland.

“Your watch has finally ended, dear daughter”, he said quietly.

He signaled to a couple of his men to gently extricate Bran’s body from his daughter’s arms. But before they could remove him, Meera brushed a hand over Bran’s face to close his dead, vacant eyes. Then she bestowed a final kiss on his forehead before relinquishing her hold on him.

Jon reached out to help the men lift up his brother’s body but was stopped when Howland laid a restraining hand on his arm and shook his head.

“Jon”, he said. “Please allow us to prepare the body for the journey home. My maester is learned in the art of preserving bodies after death”.

Jon had heard of such a process, a technique brought to the shores of Westeros from the lands beyond Essos. He had half listened to Sam prattle on about it excitedly one afternoon as they shared a bottle of ale. The gist of what he retained of Sam’s account was that the internal organs and all moisture was removed, leaving a dried up husk of a body that decayed very slowly. He envisioned having to transport home a body resembling that of a wizened old man, a far cry from Bran’s natural appearance at his time of death. It seemed unnatural to him and he shook his head.

“If it please, my lord, I’d sooner take home just his bones”, he said. “He was a child of the north and
we northerners are notoriously slow to adapt to the ways of the south”.

Howland nodded and issued his final instructions before Bran’s body was laid in a small cart. Meera indicated that she would accompany the body but not before stopping to say a few words in Jon’s ear.

“Now he’s truly free, unfettered by a useless body”, she whispered. “I reckon he’s watching over us right now”.

Jon raised his eyes and smiled, thinking of his younger brother soaring amongst the clouds. He turned his gaze east when he heard Drogon roar in the distance. Daenerys was riding into the sun as it crept higher in the sky. Jon watched as the edge of the sun darkened as the dragon flew past, its shadow beginning to creep across the fiery orb, swallowing the sun slowly until, briefly, it was the long night once again. He turned when he felt a tug on his arm.

“Howland?” asked Howland.

Jon studied Howland’s face for a few seconds before replying.

“What do you know?” asked Jon, narrowing his eyes.

Howland shrugged.

“On that not much more than you, I’ll wager”, he replied genially. “But…I do know that when your father met and fell in love with your mother, it wasn’t just happenstance. Fate didn’t just slap him about the brow and tell him to pay attention. He already believed that the bloodlines of Targaryen and Stark would have to join forces to end the darkness that was coming. He already believed that wooing your mother was the key to ensuring a future for us all. He believed that you would be the light bringer, lad…the one who would lead us all to the break of dawn once more. So, the question remains…how did you make this happen?”

Jon reached into his pocket and produced the piece of obsidian.

“I removed it from him, the Stark one. I pulled it from a gaping wound in his chest”, he explained.

Howland peered more closely at the stone.

“How did you know what to do?” he asked.

Jon let a ghost of a smile flit across his face.

“A little bird told me”, he replied.

Howland chuckled and nodded in understanding.

“They’ll be singing songs about this battle before ‘ere long”, he said with a broad smile, poking Jon in the chest. “Let’s hope they get the details right”.

One of Howland’s appeared at his side and whispered into his ear. Howland shifted his gaze back to Jon when the man stepped back.

“We have located your companion, face down in the mud and snow”, said Howland.

Jon held his breath for second, bracing himself for more bad news.

“And?” he asked tentatively.
Howland smiled.

“He lives, lad... he lives”, he said. “Half-dead, mind you, but with care and time he should recover nicely”.

Jon sagged with relief before breaking away to follow Howland’s man.

Satin was propped up against a tree, covered loosely with a moth-eaten blanket and hugging a metal mug to his chest. His left arm was in a sling, his hair was tangled and matted with blood and his right eye was swollen shut. Nevertheless, he managed a cheery greeting when he spotted Jon.

“How fare thee?” quavered Satin.

Jon dropped to his knees and grasped Satin’s right shoulder.

“Better than you, I’d wager”, he replied.

Jon rolled over on to his backside and leaned against the tree by Satin’s side. Satin awkwardly raised the mug to take a sip of the steaming broth and then shifted his gaze upwards.

“I saw the dragon flying over the treetops”, he said. Then he lowered his chin and turned back to Jon. “I half expected you to be riding with her”.

Jon closed his eyes for a few seconds.

“Aye, so did I,” he replied with a deep sigh. “Only she was not in favour of me going with her.”

“Oh, aye”, said Satin wearily.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes until Jon sensed that his friend was drifting off. He gently extricated the mug from Satin’s limp fingers and set it on the ground. Then he shifted closer, allowing Satin’s nodding head to rest against his shoulder. He kept watch over him as he snored peacefully by his side until the darkness overtook him, too. And there they remained for several hours as the world hummed around them, propping each other up for comfort and warmth as they slipped into the black.

The day had passed as if she was in a dream. She and the baby slept for hours on end, waking only to feed before falling back to sleep again. At some point she and the child awoke to noises coming from outside but they continued to doze, not wanting to hear or know of anything outside their cocoon of a room. Just a little more rest was all she wanted. That’s all she asked for.

She awoke in darkness, and for a moment she didn’t know where she was until she felt the baby squirm beside her, waking as well. She placed him against her breast and listened to the fire pop and to the excited voices just outside her door. She thought she was still dreaming when Gilly burst into her room. She wondered what on earth was happening as she watched Gilly stride across the room to the window where the shutters were still shut firmly against the brutal winter winds.

When Gilly pried open the shutters, the light was almost blinding. After all this time they had all become as accustomed to the darkness as moles. Although the sun was still low in the sky it was climbing fast. Val gasped and forced herself into a sitting position, careful not to disturb the child still suckling at her breast. She shielded her eyes against the bright light before glancing down at her son’s face.

“Look, young ‘un”, she murmured. “The dawn has finally returned”.
The boy’s face was bathed in a golden hue. As he fed noisily he raised both his hands, making tiny fists as if in triumph. Val tenderly wiped away a bit of milk that was dribbling down his chin before leaning down to kiss his upturned nose. Gilly made happy noises, hands on hips, until finally turning away from the window.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Val?” she gushed.

Val closed her eyes. She felt the warmth wash over her, enveloping her in a loving embrace. Light dappled behind her lids. She slipped back into a dream, her body lying limp in the warm sunlight. She opened her eyes reluctantly when she heard the baby snuffle and pull away from her nipple. She switched sides, waiting until the boy had latched on again, before settling back against the pillows.

“Tis glorious, for sure, Gilly”, she replied with a sigh.

Gilly sank into the mattress.

“Dare we hope for the victors to return anon?” she asked.

“We should”, replied Val. “We most decidedly should”.

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