Summary

Jon Snow wakes up in Winterfell, two years in the past. He struggles with his knowledge of the upcoming wars, the mystery of his mother's forgotten letters, and the prophecy of the Prince That Was Promised. How much time does he have until the Others invade Westeros?
Chapter 1

Jon was soaring. Above the clouds. Above Westeros and all its kingdoms. Above the world as he knew it. Jon was made of air and light and all the good feelings he had never known. He flew past a thousand stars and a thousand suns, beyond this world and into the next. In this infinite expanse, he felt welcome. Warm tendrils stretched throughout his limbs and encircled his heart, embracing him.

Jon followed this feeling blindly. He lay down his sword and shield. For once, trusting in the strength of a power he didn't understand.

If he could think, the young Lord Commander might have been frightened to leave behind not only the Wall, but the world he knew. Jon Snow might have protested vehemently at the very notion of abandoning his duty, his brethren, and the great black kingdom his ancestors have guarded for centuries upon centuries. And yet Jon Snow could remember nothing. Jon Snow wasn't anyone. A bird in the branches, a wolf in the dark. A whisper through the trees.

To go forward… you must go back. A voice called from the fire.

With numb mind and body, Jon saw a seemingly never-ending sequence of images. Each scene faded into the next at an alarming speed. A red haired woman lay panting on a thick blanket of furs. A thickset man garbed in black handed him a longsword. A white wolf curled into a young boy's side by a dim fire. Two young lads roughhoused in the snow. A dwarf catapulted himself off a fence and flipped through the air… on and on it went.

The visions called to him. Begged him to remember something important, something crucial about the identity of the boy, and the red-haired woman, and the winter roses encapsulated by glass walls. Walls of ice. Certainly, he felt a tugging in his chest and a jolt in his heart when the boy knelt in front of a white weirwood tree and spoke some long-forgotten vow. But try as he might. Jon could not connect the pieces.

Then suddenly, a sharp pain rocked his senses and Jon's vision went black.

When he woke, a mirage of color and light floated across his vision. The colors swirled and came to a sudden halt, distilling into a solid image. Fur. Brown fur, to be exact. Jon exhaled painfully, his mind slow to process anything other than the strong longing to go back to the blackness and the visions. The world of dreams called to him once more, and he tried to close his eyes and return, but the pain prevented him.

He groaned and lifted a hand to his head. His arms were heavy and slow, the sensation in his hands and feet were dulled, as if waking from a long and deep slumber. A bright light shone from an unnamed source on his left. The light begged him to wake further, but Jon was fighting a grogginess that trapped his body in a tight tube.

The first thing he noticed was the earthy scent that clung to the surrounding fabrics. A smell Jon recognized, yet could not pinpoint the source. He rolled lazily onto his side. His limbs slow and lethargic. A burning pain emanated from his back. Jon blinked and took notice of the direwolf tapestry hung on the wall, the black tunic laid out on the bed, the silver painted candles, the wooden sword leaning against the bedpost.

For the Watch…

Jon yelled and stumbled to his feet. Unseen enemies stabbed at him. Again and again. Snarling.
Hateful eyes peered from beyond the rafters, from the window, under the bed and bloody hands were raised against him. Jon panicked and scrambled for the invisible sword at his hip. One foot got caught in the thick furs of his Winterfell bed and he went crashing to the floor. A loud bang resonated. The wooden sword on the wall went clattering to the ground and his loud yell frightened the white ball of fur that, until then, was lying silently at the base of his bed frame.

Jon's head slammed against the floor and stars danced in his eyes. He shouted again when his body exploded in pain. Silver daggers danced across the room. Taunting. Mocking.

*For the Watch. Why? For the Watch. For the Watch.*

Footsteps approached from down the hall and Jon dimly registered the sound of his door hinge squeaking open. Another familiar sound he knew from long ago. The stars fluttered to the outskirts of his vision.

"Lad?"

Jon blinked. The sound of this voice was familiar. A pleasant tenor that plucked at his heartstrings. *I know this man,* Jon realized. The pain in his head intensified as his eyes focused on the dark hand outstretched toward him, and beyond the hand, a long face was staring, confused. The man was measuring him, and Jon could have laughed if not for the damnable pain, it had been so long since someone looked at him like that. Like he was a boy.

A much shorter and smaller Ghost padded to his side and licked his right hand. Jon's eyes were riveted to the person looming over him. A piece of the puzzle fell into place.

*It can't be…*

"Jory?" Jon croaked dumbly. The name sent a shiver down his spine.

*No…* another voice protested. The puzzle was jumbled once more and Jon was left grasping at the lingering facts. Jory Cassel was killed in King's Landing. By the Lannisters. Killed defending Lord Eddard Stark in a street brawl. A brawl started by Jaime Lannister. Yet, here the man was, staring in befuddlement down at Jon's body twisted in his bed sheets. Jon shifted his gaze to the still-growing direwolf that pawed at his hand.

*My hand…* There was something odd about the hand that had fallen to rest near his face. Jon lifted his palm and brought it closer. Where there should have been a burn, from grabbing a lit lantern and hefting it at the dead man in Jeor Mormont's chambers, there was none. Fresh, pale, slightly pink skin had taken it's place. Turning his palm over to look at his thumb, Jon noticed several more missing scars. Scars that once served as evidence of his training days with Alliser Thorne. *What - What's happening?*

"That's Ser Jory, to you, lad," the knight said gruffly and then grabbed him by the collar. Jon's head swum at the sudden righting, and an explosion of raw nerves. He lost his footing and crashed into the wall. Jory tutted.

"-not right with you…" Jory mumbled under his breath as he lifted Jon's arm over his shoulder and put another around his waist. "You been drinking, boy?"

Another wave of pain struck Jon's spine and his knees buckled. The pounding in his head returned with a vengeance and Ser Jory stared at him with slight irritation. Then, something changed in the other man's expression as the knight looked down at his hands.

"No…" Jon groaned, closing his eyes.
Whatever Jory said next, Jon barely heard, as his memories returned to him in a sudden rush. Ygritte.
Sam. Lord Mormont. The deal with Tormund Giantsbane, the giant Wun Wun… decapitating Janos Slynt. The stabbing. Image after image connected in a startling realization and Jon felt his world turn upside down and then downside right. Fear and anger and shame flooded his blood, until he felt he was on fire.

_I was betrayed._ Jon realized with horror. With sharp clarity, he remembered the snarling face of Bowen Marsh, and the light touch of snow on his eyelashes as darkness overtook him. Jon reached a hand around his back and found it sticky, from blood or sweat, he did not know. Pulling it back, his hand was red.

Jory swore. "To the Maester, now lad."

Jon stumbled and Jory caught him again. By that time, Jon knew he was fading.

_I already died…_ Jon protested silently. _Why send me here to die again?

Jory dragged Jon through the stone halls of Winterfell and toward Maester Luwin's tower. Darkness gathered at the edge of his vision and Jon succumbed to the sensation. Voices called to them from the conjoining rooms. Voices that made him groan and cry in heartbreak. Figures from the past slowly emerged, but Jon could not speak, despite his great desire to respond.

His eyes opened when he heard Robb, his brother's voice, strong and youthful, and he gasped in both shock and joy when his brother's arm came to support him. Jon saw the red-brown curls from his dreams and nightmares. Concerned blue eyes, filled with equal parts love and concern. Robb's mouth moved, but Jon could not put the words into sentences.

From the conversation around him, Jon knew he was bleeding badly. _Am I dead then…?_ Jon wondered. It would make sense. More sense than the reality around him. Relief threaded its way through his arms and legs. _Finally, I am dead. It is strangely kind that the God's saw fit to return me to Winterfell. Will the healers be able to fix these wounds? No one ever said death would be this painful._

Somehow, they made it to the Maester's turret located below the rookery, though Jon could not recall passing through the kennels. Dogs barked and howled and the Maester's crows squaked and cried _Snow, Snow, Snow._ Or was that just Jon's imagination? The Lord Commander fought to remain conscious as he was laid gently onto Luwin's table, his nose was pressed against dark hard wood, and someone spoke gently into his ear.

"Jon… I will need to cut… remain calm… hold… happened…"

Jon tried to understand, but he was too far gone. It didn't matter anymore. He was dead and his beloved brother was here to take care of him. Even Ghost, as a little puppy. The Gods would take care of this mess.

Time seemed jumbled. It was light and then it was dark. Words washed over him and then faded into nothing. The flames of the Red Woman danced in his vision, and Jon didn't even care when dragons breathed fire and the door opened and closed, and the Others were suddenly unimportant. Because, he was in heaven, and it was no longer his responsibility.

When he woke next, a loud clamor surrounded him. Jon supposed he was battling back and forth with consciousness. No one never said death would be this confusing. Bells sounded in the distance. The alarm bells. Why would there be alarm bells in the heavens? Robb's heavy feet rushed out of the room with determination and Jon wanted to cry after him. _Don't go!_ Soon after, a large shadow
appeared in the Maester's door.

His father was speaking to him.

"... no trace of the dagger or it's... remember... Jon! Jon!"

Jon smiled. Father was here. The only person who had ever truly loved him, completely and wholly, just for being Jon. Everything was perfect. Just when he decided to finally abandon his post, everything went black. Jon was soaring again and the voice returned.

*To go forward... you must go back.*

Death was not so merciful, Jon mused humorlessly.

Seven days later, by this world's reckoning, Jon sat in bed. His back was propped against two large pillows, though it did nothing but aggravate his mending wounds. With a heavy sigh, he met Lord Stark's piercing grey eyes.

"As I said earlier, I cannot recall anyone entering my chambers. I woke from a nightmare and fell to the ground. I felt pain, and the next I knew, Jory was carrying me to the Maester's."

Ned Stark's nostril's flared in frustration. Jon could have laughed or cried at the familiar sight. Though if he had, they would have likely fed him Milk of the Poppy again and he wouldn't wake for another day.

Maester Luwin recorded that Jon had been stabbed twelve times by what appeared to be several different daggers, and the wounds had smoked for a full day afterwards. From the conversation Jon had with the Maester, Luwin was completely baffled. The heat from the wounds seemed to simultaneously heal and cauterize Jon's skin, and there was no medical explanation for this phenomenon. The Maester promised to write to the Citadel for advice and guidance.

Jon knew how the injuries truly occurred, but he could not easily explain his miraculous return to Winterfell - almost two years in the past. The past of the only reality that he had ever known. Or was that life a dream? Jon was still not unconvinced that this was a strange test the Gods had concocted for him. Do all men return to the past after death? When would he ascend? Regardless, he could not explain how the injuries had manifested onto his fourteen-year-old back. No one else seemed to be aware of the future. Only the Gods knew the answers to those questions.

But why would the Gods send him here? And now? At the beginning of all things.

*There is only one God, Jon Snow.* Melisandre's exotic voice would say, whenever his thoughts turned to the strange fate he had been dealt.

*I did not die by fire,* Jon would think in turn. *Why would the Red God handle my soul?*

He knew the answer. Jon could scarcely think it, let alone say it aloud to himself. *Why would the Red God torment my soul? Why would any God?*

*I failed.* Jon knew it in his heart. Jon had failed in his duty to the realm, and to the world. He could not salvage the Night's Watch, he could not defend against the darkness. Jon had failed and perhaps... perhaps this was his punishment. Likewise, perhaps this was a test of his determination. Or a delusion. Was this another grand fall into utter unconsciousness?

The first night, when he woke in the Maester's turret, Jon could not sleep. The pain in his back had
been reduced to a lingering throb - thanks to Maester Luwin's medicines - but he could not sleep. He could only stare at the ceiling and question his existence. Why was he here? What was he supposed to change? Was he meant to live out his life again, and again, reliving the same death for all eternity as some sort of neverending punishment for betraying Ygritte? Was this the will of the Old Gods, the New Gods, the Fire God or the evil Other that sends the White Walkers and all manner of Hell?

Fortunately, the Maester, Robb, and his father all seemed to agree that the stabbing was an unfortunate accident. A mistaken assassination. The dagger was meant for King Robert, whose chambers were directly above Jon Snow's. The Lord of Winterfell had closed the gates to the keep within several hours of the attack, and the Kingsguard was conducting an investigation throughout Wintertown. As far as Jon knew, the unknown assailant had yet to be apprehended. And they wouldn't be.

Was this all a delusion?

All the people seemed to think, and act, and behave separately from him, which shook Jon's belief that this was a vivid dream or illusion. Normally, in his dreams, if he feared it to be true - it became true. Here, people acted of their own accord, as if they were living, sentient beings, beyond the reach of Jon's subconscious.

With that knowledge, came other unpleasant knowledge. In this Winterfell, events were playing out exactly as they had two years past. The King had come to ask Lord Stark to be Hand of the King, Jon Arryn had recently died, Sansa would marry Joffrey, and according to Arya, Jon would be joining the Night's Watch. Father would go, of course, to the capital where he would later die. Robb would inevitably lead an army South, to his death. Theon would betray them and Winterfell would fall to the Bolton Bastard. Jon clenched his teeth. *All the while, I will be freezing at the wall, trying and failing to prevent the Long Night.*

When Jon first woke the second day, he cried for joy at the sight of little Arya curled against his side while his lord father slumbered in the corner chair. Even seeing Sansa's upturned nose brought a certain level of emotion to the surface. Their faces, their voices, their small touches brought Jon back from the brink of insanity.

Jon studied his father's features. It had occurred to him that, amidst all the chaos, Lord Stark was acting rather strangely. Despite the gravity of the situation, his upcoming departure from Winterfell for the capital, and Bran's unfortunate fall, Eddard Stark had decided to devote an inordinate amount of time to Jon's bedside. A fact that Lady Stark noticed, and commented on to the waitstaff, the cook, his siblings, the guards, and to her Lord Husband when she graced the archway of Jon's door... that one time. Jon knew his father loved him, but he didn't think himself so self-important that Lord Stark should tear himself away from his trueborn son's bedside.

And yet, for some reason, the Lord of Winterfell continued to question him about the stabbing. Long after it was unanimously decided that the assassin was meant for the King.

He'd had been at his bedside for the past three days, morning and night, asking question after question while Jon bumbled over false stories and imagined events, contradicting himself and drawing further suspicion. If only Lord Stark could have waited a day or two more, for Jon to recover from his shock and concoct a plausible story, these constant interrogations might have been avoided.

As a bastard, Jon always felt fortunate enough to live in his father's house, but he never been given this kind of *singular* attention before. It was unnerving, even for a man that had survived death. One time, after Jon woke from a particularly long nap, he found his father standing over his bed with the strangest look of trepidation on his face, and when Jon locked eyes with him, he fled the room.
"Jon, I need you to focus," his father's voice brought him back to the present, and away from his torrential dark thoughts.

Jon turned to him and struggled to lay back on the feather pillows that had been gifted to him, uncomfortable in more ways than one. The pillows were Sansa's castaways, most likely, and lumpy in some places. Still, it was a sweet gesture that Jon had appreciated. Her mother would not have allowed her to sacrificed her better pillows, or spend gold on new ones.

Now, Ned Stark was staring at him with deep concern. Jon had been silently brooding, avoiding his father's gaze and staring at the flickering flame of his bedside candle.

"Do you remember any words being said?"

For the Watch.

"No," Jon lied and turned to gaze at the vase of winter roses Arya had plucked from the glass gardens. Several flowers still bore thorns. And it wasn't a vase, not truly, but a muddy wooden cup she had stolen from the kitchens. It was the most beautiful gift he had ever received, and Jon had told her so.

Arya was the only other member of his family who visited often, besides Robb and Father. Sansa would occasionally stand at the doorway and twiddle her thumbs before running away like a scared butterfly. Jon had not seen or heard from Theon, Bran or Rickon. Of course, Bran had fallen from the Broken Tower sometime during Jon's long sleep, to his utmost dismay. Jon wished he could have prevented that, more than anything. That was something he could have changed for the better.

Jon felt Lord Stark's gaze on his face, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"I need you to tell the truth, Jon. Has someone threatened you?"

Jon felt his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth. He shook his head, No. In the back of his mind, he felt how discomforting it was to finally be the focus of all of Lord Stark's attention. After all these years, his boyhood dream was fulfilled. It was not so satisfying.

"Very well," Lord Stark sighed and sat back against the large wooden chair that had been brought for him. It was a lord's chair, intricately carved to show racing wolves up the arms and across the back. "You know I cannot help you if you are unwilling to tell the truth. I know you are lying, Jon. I know you think I do not notice, but you always flare your nostrils when you fib," his eyes crinkled a little at the side.

Jon could have shouted for joy. It seemed Lord Stark was finally giving up. "So, tell me about this nightmare."

Jon wrinkled his brow. Ygritte's laughing face danced across his vision. "My nightmare?"

"Yes," Lord Stark said no more, only waited expectantly.
Jon opened and closed his mouth, at a loss for word. Lord Stark might as well have asked for Jon to
tell him about his death. What did it feel like to die Jon? Tell me what it was like.

_It was wonderful_, Jon thought wistfully. _Before the pain came back, death was bliss._

"Well," Jon cleared his throat uncomfortably. The wheels turned in his mind. He remembered the
flash of images before… or after… his death. "There was… the Wall."

"You have never been to the Wall," his father stated plainly. Jon nodded and frowned.

"Yes, I was there, nonetheless. There was a great fissure, running up the ice," Jon gestured to the
vase at his bedside. "A single rose grew in the cracks, but when I approached, it caught fire."

For some reason, this seemed to displease Lord Stark, "That is not a nightmare. At least, it is not like
the nightmares you used to have as a child."

Jon remembered those. Once, when he was five, he ran to his father's bed frightened by ghouls and
the dark spirits. Lady Catelyn answered the door, to Jon's horror, and dragged him back to his rooms,
locking the door behind him. Jon slept under his bed for a month afterward, until Lord Stark
uncovered the incident and he was permitted to sleep in Robb's rooms, temporarily.

"No, this was different," Jon admitted. "I was filled with great dread."

Lord Stark leaned forward. That was when inspiration struck Jon and he decided to combine the
truth with his lies.

"And when I turned around, I saw a dead man, and then another. I saw an army of wights, with blue
eyes. The crows above me all cried, _Corn, Corn_, and I saw a red star falling in the sky. It was a dark
omen, I knew. When I turned, the wall was gone and the dead men walked in the North."

Lord Stark rubbed his beard distractedly. He stared at the winter roses. Jon was disappointed. His
father seemed more preoccupied by the flowers than the dead men. "And then you woke?"

"No, then I felt like I was soaring," Jon met his father's gaze time. "I saw other things. But they did
not make sense to me. The Bolton banners in Winterfell, a stag with a flaming heart, a dark sword
with ripples of red hidden underneath in the steel…"

"You dreamt of the Wall," the Lord of Winterfell mumbled. Then, he met Jon's gaze and spoke. "A
few days ago you requested to leave with your Uncle, and journey to Castle Black. Yoren and my
brother have already departed, along with the Imp. Your stabbing prevented your departure and now
you are infirm. I am afraid you will have to wait until either Benjen, or Yoren returns. It may be
some time. Weeks. Months."

"Uncle Benjen has left already?"

The news filled Jon with anxiety. Already, things were changing from the original timeline. Events
were spiraling out of his control.

"I am sorry, but perhaps it is for the best. You are young yet. The Wall will always be there, Jon. I
have convinced Catelyn to shelter you here until Maester Luwin gives you leave, and Yoren
returns."

Jon felt a hand fall on his shoulder and he looked up in surprise. Hesitation marred Lord Stark's
noble features.
"You are leaving for King's Landing soon."


Jon could only look down at his hands. Hands that were meant to be scarred and show early signs of frostbite. The hands that killed Janos Slynt, and countless other wildlings. The hands that had once pleased Ygritte until she screamed his name. And the hands that potentially nocked the arrow that pierced her heart. Hands that longed to strangle the bastard, Ramsey Bolton, even now, before the events of the pink letter.

"Will-"

Jon's words were cut short. The sound of heavy, lumbering footsteps, and the clink of armor reached his ears. Ned Stark held up a hand to silence him, and a loud, booming voice demanded that Ser Jory stand aside. Jon's father rose and fell to his knees, just as the door swung open with a crash.

"Ah, Ned!"

Jon's eyes widened. King Robert was a fat man, and his frame easily filled the entrance to Jon's small room. He looked ridiculously out of place in the humble setting. The Baratheon King dressed in a black and gold doublet - probably worth more than all of Jon's possessions put together - that bore the splatter of fat grease. Jaime Lannister leisurely trailed after the king with one hand on the pommel of his longsword. Jon fought down a wave of anger at the sight of the dastardly Kingslayer and quickly looked away.

*There's nothing you can do now, Jon. As much as he'd like to wrap his hands around the Kingslayer's neck and squeeze, Jon wasn't likely to get further than three steps without collapsing, and the Queen would have him executed within the hour.*

"Your Grace," Jon's father said stiffly. There was tension between the two.

"Stop that," Robert took a few steps forward and was followed by the knight. Jon detected the faint scent of sour wine in the air. Just in case, he placed a firm hand on Ghost's back. The direwolf was looking curiously, and soundlessly, at the new visitors.

"So, this is your bastard. Ha! Finally! I have before me the evidence that Ned Stark once forgot his honor!"

Jon did not know what to make of that statement. He bristled indignantly, but the imp's words came back to him and he held his tongue. In the distance, he could hear the dogs barking in the kennels, laughing at the King's jest.

Lord Stark's face was stone and he rose to his feet jerkily.

"My son, Jon," he said unceremoniously.

*Lord Commander of the Night's Watch.* Jon swallowed the title in his throat.

Jon inclined his head, "Forgive me, Your Grace. I cannot kneel."

The King waved his hand in a dismissive fashion, as if swatting a fly. "No matter, no matter. I suppose I have you to thank, for taking that stupid cunt's dagger. Although, I do not know how they could have mistaken your rooms for mine. Or you for me! I'm a wee bit plumper, I should say. Must have been a drunk assassin. Ha! I have had a few. Luckily, I have these noble fools," the King jerked a thumb at Jaime Lannister's silent, golden figure, "to protect me from knives in the dark. You,
lad, are not so lucky."

"You honor me, Your Grace," Jon inclined his head once more. For some reason, his respect did not please the King.

"Hmph," the King frowned. "Honored by a knife. Unlikely, methinks."

"Is your curiosity sated?" Lord Stark voice broke Jon's focus on the King. Eddard stepped forward, and Jon was blocked from the King's view.

Jon blinked. Even if the King and Lord Stark were foster brothers, stepping in front of the King was audacious. King's were fickle things. Jon knew from his time with Lord Stannis at the wall, and King Robert was known to be rather verbose with whatever displeased him. The tension that permeated the air became more pronounced.

"My curiosity will be sated when I damn well say it is sated," The King said in a quiet, dark rumble. A tense moment followed and Jon suspected the King was glaring fiercely at his father, but he could not see the interaction from around Lord Stark's back and winter cloak.

"Ha!" the King finally broke, and his booming laughter filled the room. "Ah, Ned. Ned. So serious. I have not seen that look on your face in far too many years. And yet, I am the King and you will step aside."

Lord Stark's shoulders set rigidly. "My son is still injured, and I have just interrogated him about his attacker. I am certain he suffers from exhaustion."

The excuse was rather pitiful, Jon thought, and he wondered why his father made excuses. These two men grew up together. Wasn't this the Baratheon who was to marry Lyanna Stark, his long dead aunt?

"Let the boy speak then," King Robert's fat face appeared around his father's frame. "You, lad, do you tire?"

Jon's eyes swiveled between his father and the King. Ned Stark was looking at him sternly. A silent command to obey.

Jon opened his mouth and paused. Lord Stark wanted to keep Jon away from the King for a reason. Something about this situation did not sit well with him. It tickled the back of his brain. If Sam was here, what would he do?

"I am at your service, Your Grace."

Lord Stark's eyes darkened, but he stepped aside and the King approached, with a smug grin. Robert's chins jiggled as he lowered himself into the chair his father recently vacated.

"Ah, yes, as I was saying," the King began eagerly, "Jon Snow. Jon Snow," The King tested the name on his tongue, as if by repeating it, he could somehow lessen the sin of Jon's birth.

Appearing to like the name, the King continued. "Jon Snow. You took the knife intended for my body, and for that, I am grateful. What would you have of me, as a reward?"

Jon wondered what rumors were flying around Winterfell. Did the King think he battled an assassin in the night?

"Nothing, Your Grace."
The King snorted and Jon thought it was a very unattractive sound. In the background, Lord Stark clenched and unclenched his left hand. A pinch of nerves? Jon could not recall a moment when he saw the stern Lord of Winterfell standing so anxiously, except perhaps as he awaited the birth of his children.

If Sam were here, he would know instantly. Sam always had a way of unraveling mysteries and making things clear. He'd quote some book verse and Jon would sit, stunned, that it hadn't occurred to him before.

But Sam wasn't here, and it didn't make sense. The King was being pleasant, and Jon could find no major faults in his actions, even if he was a bit brusque.

"Come now. I am a generous man. I am especially generous to my bastards, and you are the bastard of my oldest friend. Every lad needs something," the King prodded, sounding almost bored. Jon wracked his brain for an answer. *What do I need? I need to go back in time, further than this, and stop Bran's fall. I need my father to stay in Winterfell. I need to not be a bastard.*

"My son is bound for the Wall, sometime after we depart," Lord Stark began, "perhaps a warm cloak and boots would suffice."

"Ah! Furs fit for a King! I've heard it's dastardly cold there," the King eyed Jon expectantly. "I will bedeck you in furs, what say you?"

"Pardon, father," Jon spoke softly, sensing the Lord's growing ire, "I do have a suggestion, if it please you, Your Grace. I have always longed for a blade of my own-"

"A sword!" the King beamed and stood with his hands outstretched. His Grace appeared extremely pleased by this suggestion. Lord Stark scowled in the background, "Yes! A fitting reward. You want to be a fighter, like your father. Yes, I see it now. Jon Snow's bastard blade, hacking apart wildlings and ghouls. Once you're healed, of course," the King nodded in acquiescence to Lord Stark's glare.

Throughout his speech, the King had been extremely animated, even imitating a few swings at an imaginary enemy. "Feel better lad, and soon you'll be swinging your new blade."

Needing no permission, the King strode out of the room suddenly, with barely a glance toward his newly chosen Hand. Jaime Lannister bowed to Lord Stark before he moved to follow the King.

Jon locked eyes with his father and gulped. Lord Stark was angry. Jon felt his mouth go dry, but he dared not look away. Why keep the King away from Jon? What was the harm in asking for a well made blade to accompany him to the Wall? Surely, it was a more fitting gift than a cloak. The Wall had cloaks. It needed swords. Why would Lord Stark ask him to disobey the King, for no reason?

There was something amiss here. Jon leveled his father with the steely look of the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. A look Jeor Mormont had given him, more than once.

A flicker of surprise passed over Lord Stark's face. Then, his father's gaze fell to the floor, almost in shame. Without a word, Lord Stark left the room. Hurt stabbed Jon's heart and he buried his hands in Ghost's fur. The Bastard of Winterfell didn't deserve any explanations. The direwolf licked and licked his face, and Jon realized a few tears had made tracks down his cheeks. Shame filled Jon, and then sadness. Why did the Gods send him back, only to make him powerless to the events that follow?

*There is only one God, Jon Snow.*

Jon turned away from Ghost's furs and stared into the fire. He saw nothing.
Lord Stark was headed straight for his death, and Jon was powerless to stop it. Once again, he would stand by and watch as the people he loved, died, thousands of miles away and alone. Longing to end this feeling of dread, Jon painfully eased open the flask of Milk of the Poppy he had been given and gulped down the foul liquid. Within moments he felt his eyes grow heavy, and the medicine took effect.

Before succumbing to sleep, his gaze drifted to the wooden cup of winter roses. Someone had taken one.
Letter and The Catspaw

Chapter Summary

Jon finds a mysterious chest painted with winter roses and stops an assassin sent to kill Bran.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Just a few things about the story I thought I should tell readers to give you the heads up!

(1) The story will use a mixture of tv universe and book universe.

(2) The story will be relatively fast based. Jon's got places to be, and he's gotta get there. He's VIP.

(3) Jon may be OOC every once and while.

Too long, didn't read?: It's the author? Ew. Just skip this part and read the actual chapter.

The days after Lord Stark's departure were somber and unsettling. Jon was bedridden for a week, visited only by Maester Luwin, Robb, and the direwolves. Alone with his thoughts, Jon's mood grew solemn. His thoughts turned to the Wall, Stannis, Val, Sam... all the brothers he left behind and the betrayal he never saw, lurking in the shadows. The dreams were even worse. Jon dreamt of Ygritte falling, her body pierced by arrows. He dreamt of his father's head, rolling on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. He dreamt of winter roses shattering the Wall. Most of all, he dreamt of an inescapable fire that rose in the South and rode northward, until Jon was trapped between a wall of silver-blue ice and a wall of black fire, and he woke in a feverish sweat.

The only bright day of his existence in this new world was the day that Arya, Robb and Mikken brought him the King's gift. It was brought to him the day before the King and his new Hand left for the Capital. King Robert commissioned for him a simple, steel longsword with a soft leather hilt and an easy grip. When drawn from its scabbard, the blade rung sweetly. Jon took an instant liking to the sword and named it "Sweetsinger". Arya thought it was a stupid name, and demanded Jon change it, but Jon held firm. Robb said it sounded good.

The next morning, he handed her the simple blade he'd commissioned from Mikken and she named it "Needle". She embraced him gently and Jon held her with unshed tears in his eyes. All the things he wanted to say stuck in his throat.

When Lord Stark came to his room to say goodbye, Jon told him to be careful, he told him the Capital was an unsafe place and to keep his guards close. It was a mistake to say those things. The Lord of Winterfell looked down at him with an angry, guarded expression that said it all. He was a lord, and bastards should not condescend to their fathers. They parted ways on even poorer terms than Jon could have imagined.
As soon as the Maester readied him to walk, Jon was up and swinging Sweetsinger in the practice yard. Ser Rodrik urged him to practice slowly, and it was a challenge. The greatest challenge was overcoming the pain and taughtness of his back. Every day, he risked irritating his wounds, but he couldn't stop. Jon was already frustrated from his week abed, and overwhelmed from his worries. He needed to swing a sword. He needed to feel useful again.

His youthful body was more gangly than he remembered, and he found himself eager to remaster the old steps of Ser Alliser's drills. In the morning's, Jon sparred with Robb and Theon and even the Master-at-Arms himself. In the beginning it was agony but within the month, Jon could lay his half brother on his back repeatedly, a fact Robb was none too pleased with but Theon found it immensely amusing.

Robb was a bad loser, worse than what Jon remembered. In their youth, Robb was always better than him at everything. Riding, sword fighting, shooting, hunting, whistling, singing... girls. Silently, Jon wondered if Robb really was better at everything, or if Jon was just too afraid to ever act. A bastard couldn't be better than a trueborn son. Lady Catelyn was just as likely to throw him on the streets as look at him, so Jon toed the line all his youth. There was never a reason to try.

Now, however, Jon was more confident. The man that held the Wall against Mance Rayder and his armies. The man who slayed an Other at Hardhome. The man the Night's Watch elected, betrayed and killed. He had nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

Ser Rodrik was baffled by the sudden three-fold improvement. Jon had become the bane of the sparring yard. The old knight could only attribute it to the sudden fervor that strikes when one has confronted death. The guards joked that Jon the Bastard did not wish to be caught, unprepared, in his nightclothes again, but sometimes, when Jon was putting away his borrowed tourney sword, or breaking to wipe the sweat off his brow, he caught the men looking at him with something akin to trepidation. Ser Rodrik treated him with greater care than before, and instead of the usual critiques and comments about stance and swing, Ser Rodrik simply let Jon brawl. Sweetsinger's song was intoxicating. A blur of silver in his hands. Jon weaved a deadly dance and with every hack, imagined he was facing the foes he so desperately wanted to kill. The Others.

The glory of Jon's mornings were short lived. The rest of his day he danced to the tune of Lady Catelyn's orders.

"You, muck the stables."

"You, stock the larder."

"You, help the cook dress the turkey for tonight's dinner."

"You, clear out the Tall Tower."

You. You. You. Never Jon. Lady Catelyn wouldn't even sink so low as to call him bastard, like everyone else did when he wasn't within earshot. Jon the Younger had taken particular offense to that slur, and was notorious for unleashing his temper when provoked with a good, short "bastard!", but Jon the Elder didn't care so much about the insult. As Lord Commander, Jon had had no choice but to turn the other cheek to the naysayers and the illwishers. Make it your armor, the dwarf had said, and Jon saw the wisdom in that now.

So, when Lady Catelyn said "you" with hateful eyes, Jon obeyed silently.

During these tasks, Jon always found time to think and plot. While mucking out the stables, he thought of ways to prevent the oncoming disaster at the Wall. Perhaps, somehow, he could warn his
father of the upcoming events. If there was a strong leader in the North, Westeros would stand a
greater chance of resisting the White Walker invasion. Jon contemplated going South, and then he
contemplated going North, but never reached a decision. Sometimes, he thought about contacting
Samwell, or asking Jeor Mormont. Should he write to Maester Aemon? But no, why would they
listen to Ned Stark's bastard who'd never been to the Wall? Sam didn't even know his name.

In the end, Jon was left to his plotting and his indecision. How could one bastard change the course
of the future?

Jon sneezed violently. The dust coating his chest and arms rose and fell and settled on him once
more. He cursed to the empty room.

Wiping his hands on his muddied black trousers, Jon surveyed the scene before him.

The Tall Tower was not as decrepit as the Burned Tower, but it was crowded with unwanted
belongings. No longer inhabited by the residents of Winterfell, it had fallen into disuse and disrepair.
Jon was currently clearing out the highest room of the Tall Tower. When he first arrive, the door was
barred and covered in cobwebs. After an hour he managed to pry open the door with the help of two
others, and was currently wading through an assortment of cast-offs.

Thus far, Jon had found a table in good working order, two rusted, blunted tourney blades, the cloth
sigil of the Knight of the Laughing Tree (which Jon felt was a rather spectacular find), four
weirwood end tables, and a silver direwolf statue with embedded sapphire eyes. Once upon a time,
he imagined these were someone's treasures, but it looked like no one had been to see this room in
ten to twenty years.

The work was slow and tedious. While Jon was required to take inventory on a small scrap of paper,
he had fallen behind yesterday and hadn't kept track of any goods since. Lady Catelyn would be
displeased, no doubt, but she wouldn't say anything. She didn't like to talk to him.

A small, carved chest in the corner called his attention. It was resting underneath a lopsided crib, with
broken legs, but there was something interesting about it's color.

Jon picked his way around a mound of toppling books, and knelt on the ground to draw it out. The
upheaval caused a stir amongst the spiders, who angrily scuttled away.

"What have we here?" Jon muttered to himself. Ghost, who was guarding the entrance to the
stairwell, raised his ears and looked at the box curiously. "If it is treasure, I shall buy you a fine
collar, my friend."

Ghost was getting larger by the day. He already dwarfed Winterfell's hounds.

Sometimes, Jon wondered if Ghost's soul was sent back in time to accompany him. The direwolf
might be a puppy, but he looked at Jon in a manner that unnerved him. Ghost looked at him with
intelligence. With knowledge. And at night, when Jon whispered all his secrets into Ghost's fur, the
direwolf never seemed surprised.

Jon lifted the top of the chest, only to find resistance. Peering closer, a rusted lock was preventing
him access. "No trouble," Jon hefted one of the blunted tourney swords over his shoulder and landed
a mortal blow against the lock. Three strikes later, it clattered to the ground in defeat. Jon grinned
triumpantly and the chest creaked open.

Red and Black.

Jon's eyes widened and he closed the chest in horror. Sensing his discomfort, Ghost padded to his
side and sniffed the offending item curiously. Jon took a few calming breaths, and realizing there was no one there to observe him, opened the chest once more.

The second time around, the Targaryen sigil was less shocking to view. Jon slowly drew the tattered, three headed dragon banner onto his lap. It was old and dusty. Upon feeling the fabric, however, Jon knew it was made of rich, soft material. It flowed over his hands and feet, like a river of red and black. He held it reverently, and with awe.

A Targaryen banner in Winterfell? Jon traced a dragon's head in amazement. He had never seen this sigil flying before, except in Maester's Luwin's books, and then the sketches did not do the dragon's justice. The image inspired both fear and loyalty.

The Starks had declared for Robert during the rebellion. When the Baratheon King took the throne, all the Targaryen banners were burned. Old shields were shattered, swords were melted, and anything bearing the red and black mark of the ancient Valyrian house was secreted away, never to be spoken of again.

Perhaps there were still a few Targaryen supporters in the North, and knowing they would be hunted, they stashed the evidence of their loyalties away. Underneath the banner, a stack of parchment sat unobtrusively. The parchment was next to a wooden carved direwolf that bore numerous teeth marks. Jon picked up the direwolf curiously. He had seen one of these before. Lord Stark used to carve these teething-wolves for his infants. Jon wondered if this was once Robb's or Sansa's. The wood was pale, almost white.

Jon placed the carved wood aside, and picked up one of the pages.

… I am grateful the boy does not have his father's hair. I could explain away the eyes, knowing my connection with Ashara, but the hair? Cat does not know-

A thumping interrupted his thoughts. Jon scrambled to tuck the black and red cloth back into the small chest. By doing so, he ripped off a corner of the parchment in his hands and cursed his jumpiness.

"Hodor."

Jon looked with relief at the giant, hunched in the stairwell, "Hello, Hodor. I have been fighting moths too long. You frightened me."

"Hodor."

"Is it almost time for dinner?" Jon searched the room for the working clock he had brought with him, but could not find it in the piles, "it must be. I've been here for hours. Help me with these things and we shall eat together. Did I ever tell you about my good friend, Wun Wun?"

"Hodor," Hodor lifted Jon onto his feet and the young man futilely brushed off the lint and dust that had accumulated on his clothes. Together, they worked to bring down a table, a small statue, and a few of the end tables Jon had found. With Hodor's giant strength, the task was done in no time and soon, the tallest room of the Tall Tower was looking significantly brighter.

"Thank you for your help, Hodor," Jon clapped Hodor on the arm and after a small hesitation, grabbed the small chest. Looking closer, Jon could see a hundred, small winter roses on it's painted border. Jon dropped the chest in his room and trailed after the half giant.

After his jump through time, Jon had become closer to various characters in Winterfell. Not just Hodor, but Old Nan, Mikken, Ser Rodrik and a few others. Here, there were no Wildlings or Others...
to fight. The jibes of "bastard" didn't seem hurtful anymore either, they even seemed playful. At
night, he drank and sang with the guards, and when he stumbled to his bed, he felt carefree and
warm. Jon's second life was without much responsibility, although he wondered how long this peace
would last.

News came late to the Wall, and often without detail. Jon didn't know what instigated the war in the
South. How soon did he have before Robb would call the banners? How long before Lord Stark was
arrested for treason and brought before the King's Justice? How long before Benjen Stark went
missing and Jeor Mormont led the Watch on the Great Ranging? Every day, Jon caught himself
eying the ravens suspiciously, wondering which one would bring news of Lannister betrayal.

Dinner was a quiet affair, the conversation subdued, and the hall half empty. In Lord Stark's absence,
Jon sat at the far end of the dining hall, away from Lady Stark and her family. Robb would
eventually invite him to sit at the Lord's right hand, and Jon would have his opportunity to talk but he
would have to be patient. First, Robb would sit with Maester Luwin, and then Ser Rodrik.

When it was his turn to approach, Jon brought a flagon of mead. He poured him a horn and handed it
wordlessly. Robb looked at the drink cautiously but took a deep draw after a moment's pause. Lady
Catelyn sniffed unpleasantly and stormed out of the room. That took care of that.

"My mother still feels that I should limit myself to dry dinners," Robb commented needlessly.

"Dinner's over. Time for dessert."

"What has she got you doing now?"

"Nothing serious, clearing out the top of the Tall Tower. Which reminds me," Jon brought out the
chewed wooden wolf with glee, "I believe I found your teether."

The object smacked the palm of Robb's hand.

"Have you now?" Robb grinned and turned the item over in his hand. "Nay, brother. I have mine at
the bottom of my child's chest. Don't tell anyone I said that. I believe this one to be yours."

"Mine?" Jon furrowed his brow. "I did not think Lord Stark carved one for me."

"Why wouldn't he?" Robb shrugged and handed the white wolf back. Words passed between them
unsaid. "Besides, it suits you. Mine is made of thick wood. Northern wood. This here," Robb
pointed to the smoothed head of the direwolf, "is too light to be of the Wolfswood, and too dark to
be weirwood."

"What wood is it, then?" Jon inspected the piece with renewed interest. Earlier, it had felt familiar.

Robb shrugged, "Southern wood? You were not born here, correct?"

Jon could not say. Lord Stark never divulged the circumstances of his birth. He knew nothing of his
mother, either. It was a point of frustration and unhappiness for Jon. Until this moment, no one in the
Stark family spoke of the nature of his bastard birth in such detail.

Jon loved Robb for not flinching.

"I do not know where I was born."

"Perhaps this wood holds the key," Robb added tenderly. Jon glanced at him in surprise, but his
brother's eyes were distant, unfocused. The mead and the dinner must have taken effect. "Our
laborers have been speaking to me at length about the tall firs around here, and the evergreens of the Wolfswood. Did you know every tree has a family, and each kind of tree only grows in one place? If you placed the seed elsewhere, it will not grow. I have never learned so much about wood. Did you know water swells the wood, and heat can be used to temper it?" Robb took a heavy drag from his horn. "Speak to their man… Hagen, I believe he is called. He will tell you the nature of your teether."

Robb pointed to a tall, thin man with a forked beard. Jon clapped his half brother on the shoulder in thanks and strode off. Robb raised his horn in acknowledgement.

Hagen was seated with the other foresters and stonemasons from Wintertown. When Jon approached, they all fell silent. During his time as Lord Commander, Jon had mastered the art of presence. It was a tactic he employed from time to time. Of course, Ghost helped.

"Hagen," Jon turned to the tall man. Another thing he had learned as Lord Commander: speak with purpose. No man liked their time to be wasted. Better get to the point. "Do you know this wood?"

Jon held out the pale direwolf. Hagen sniffed, looked at Jon, then looked at the surrounding men. Dirty hands turned the piece over and over.

"Aye," Hagen squinted up at Jon. "You've chewed on it."

"So I have," Jon tossed a silver coin on the table. "I haven't chewed on that."

Hagen swiped at the coin and banged it on the table, testing its strength. Jon thought that that was rather unnecessary.

"Seen it in the South. Way South. Close to the desert. Shipped this wood too, when I worked as a hand on the trading galleys near King's Landing," Hagen tossed him the small toy and pocketed the coin. "'Tis Pale Snakewood, Jon Snow. Grows in the mountains between Blackhaven and Wyl. Short and blunt, their leaves form a canopy of shade that don't help with the sun at all. Not at all. Not that close to Dorne."

Assuming the conversation was over, Hagen turned to his men, leaving Jon to think. Where would Lord Stark get Pale Snakewood? Was he in Dorne? Was Jon?

Pale Snakewood… Jon stared at the chewed direwolf. Jon felt a pair of eyes and looked up to meet Robb's gaze.

Robb doesn't want to know where a bastard was born… Jon decided. In Robb's mind, it never mattered. He pocketed the toy and nodded at the young lord. Without another word, Jon left the gathering.

The halls of Winterfell were cold and dark. The sun sank hours ago. Winter was coming and the nights grew frostier. Jon walked until he reached parts of the fortress that were unfamiliar to him. He tried to keep pace with his thoughts. Between Wyl and Blackhaven…. Jon stumbled upon a torn tapestry of Westeros. With shaking fingers he traced the path near the Sea of Dorne. Kingsgrave and the Prince's Path lay nearby, as well as Nightsong, Yronwood, Skyreach…. Jon's eyes swept over the small drawings of towers and castles. His mother could have been from any one of those places. Searching his mind, Jon tried to remember the noble Houses of Dorne. Surely, his mother had been highborn. Or at least, a servant of a noble family.

House Caron and House Manwoody. House Wyl of the Boneway… House Dondarrion of the Stormlands did not seem very likely. House Yronwood. Jon sighed and shook his head. There were
too many possibilities and not enough evidence.

Then, remembering the note and the chest, Jon took off toward his rooms. Jon's infant toy might have been stored with other relevant items.

Unfamiliar with the darker parts of Winterfell, Jon had to retrace his steps several times before finding a path. He took two stairs at a time, racing to get to the letters. Jon was already mulling over the contents of the chest, imagining the best case scenario. Letters between a young Eddard Stark and his mother? Jon grew more excited with each step.

Running through the causeway that connected the armory and the Great Keep, Jon began to form connections in his head. If his mother was a Targaryen loyalist, it would explain the presence of the red and black blanket. The Dornish declared for the Mad King and Rheagar Targaryen during the war. Albeit slowly. The dragon banner was a blanket. Was it his blanket? Jon the Babe's blanket?

Rounding another corner, Jon heard a muffled shout, a clatter and a small scream. Without a second thought, he raced toward the sound of the scuffle.

The children's rooms! Jon realized with a start, and hurried to get closer the noises. Ghost barreled after him. By the time Jon swung open the door to Bran's room, Summer was also in view.

The door banged loudly against the stone. Bran's small, lifeless body lay on the furs of his large bed. A silent witness. Jon launched himself toward the shadow that held Lady Catelyn in his clutches. Blood drenched her front, and Jon saw a flash of silver before his fist moved of it's own accord.

Summer's jaws latched on the man's right leg and Ghost pinned him with the other. Jon held the man by his throat and squeezed. Up close, Jon could see and smell the catspaw's rotten teeth. The dagger clattered to the floor. After landing a few punches to the gut, Jon brought the man to the floor forcefully.

"WHO ARE YOU?" he demanded.

At his right, Summer was snarling and nipping at the man's hand. Ghost followed his lead. In the distance, he could hear alarm bells. The smell of smoke wafted through the window and into the room, and shouts could be heard, calling for water.

"He set fire to the rookery, as a distraction," Lady Catelyn whispered to no one. Shakily getting to her feet.

Jon held the man down with the help of Ghost and Summer, until Ser Rodrik, Robb and a few others came at Lady Stark's calls. The men was dragged away for questioning in the cells. After they left, Jon sent a servant to fetch Maester Luwin to "look at the Lady's hands".

As soon as they were alone again, he went to check on Bran. Jon placed a hand on the little lord's brow, testing for a fever that didn't exist, but he had to feel as if he was doing something to protect Bran. His half-brother's eyes flickered briefly, but never opened. Summer leapt onto the furs and began licking at his bloody chops. It seemed the direwolf broke the skin of the man's leg, after all, so Jon gave the wolf one last friendly pat before turning to leave from the room.

"Jon."

Jon froze. Lady Catelyn never used his real name. He turned to look at her, shaking from adrenaline and surprised to hear his name come from her lips. She looked pitiful. Scared. Jon recalled the last time they spoke. In another life, in this very room.
I want you to leave. The words, and their hidden hate, echoed in his mind.

Jon steeled himself for those words but Lady Catelyn said nothing.

Jon stood. Jon waited. Jon tensed with baited breath. When he finally raised his eyes, she was still looking blankly at him, or past him. Unable to bear the silence any longer, Jon bowed and moved toward the door.

"Thank you."

He kept walking, the chest forgotten. If she couldn't say it to his face, she shouldn't say it at all.
The Leaving

Chapter Summary

Jon is swept away from Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They learned very little from the man sent to kill Bran. All he kept saying was that someone paid him to kill the crippled son. A blond-haired noble. Torture was outlawed in Winterfell, by Lord Stark's orders, but that didn't stop the gaoler from making things extremely unpleasant for the man. When they searched his body in the morning, they found a rich, black and gold embroidered purse containing near 70 gold dragons, an exorbitant amount for a poor man. They learned no more because prisoner hung himself the next night.

The purse was suspicious, so Jon kept it on his person and rode into Wintertown with Ser Jory and Rodrik Cassel to ask the residents if they'd ever seen it before. No one recognized it. After that, the trail went cold. No one could say whether or not they recognized the sketch Luwin had drawn. One woman told Jon he was the drunk who chased cats near the Sept. Another young man claimed he saw him on the rooftops one night, but didn't know anything about him. All useless information.

All the while, Jon debated back and forth about opening the chest hidden in his room. After Lord Stark's death, Jon had accepted that he'd never learn anything about his birth mother, and he put the past behind him. The chest irritated the less visible scars on his heart, and he became reticent to face it. It was half a blessing, and half a demon.

Ultimately, he decided the search for Bran's killer would have to take precedent over the search for Jon's mother. So, he laid the chest aside for a later date. If he opened it now, he would not stop searching until the mystery was solved, and he couldn't afford any distractions.

His silent vow to leave the chest unopened lasted less than a month.

On a sunny day, Catelyn Stark summoned Robb, Theon, Ser Rodrik, Maester Luwin and Jon to the Heart Tree.

Jon walked toward the Godswood where the secret meeting would take place. Robb invited him to the gathering, and he was hesitant to come until he saw Lady Stark's nod of approval over Robb's shoulder. Ever since the incident with the assassin, Catelyn had not asked him to complete a single task. She was not kind to him, nor any more tolerant, but once or twice, Jon caught her staring at him curiously before she would quickly look away without a word. They interacted less, and that suited him just fine.

By the time Jon reached the great weirwood, the others were already gathered. Robb nodded to him when Jon took his place at his side. Theon and Ser Rodrik were present also and everyone wished each other a good morning.

Only Maester Luwin was absent. Lady Catelyn sat on the rock outcropping beneath the weirwood gracefully, balancing the assassin's valyrian dagger on her lap. Frost still clung to the green grass of
the glade and besides their footprints the Godswood looked completely untouched.

Jon shivered in the morning cold. It seemed to him that the red eyes of the weirwood were alert and watching. The wind rustled the leaves overhead, and Jon couldn't shake the feeling that their words might be heard. Somehow. Someway.

When Luwin finally appeared, looking apologetic, Lady Catelyn spoke.

"You are probably wondering why I have gathered you all here…"

Lady Catelyn told them of the attack, the catspaw's confession to being bribed by a young, blond nobleman, and the letter that Lysa Arryn sent before Lord Stark's departure. Jon paid particular attention to that small bit of information. In another world, he had not know about the secret correspondence between Tully sisters.

And that was how Jon Snow learned that Jon Arryn was murdered.

Jon felt a small inkling of affection for the former Hand of the King. They shared the same namesake and Lord Eddard Stark told him once that he was named after an honorable man. The news of Lord Arryn's death saddened him. And the news of that it was murder filled him with worry and paranoia. Lord Stark was headed for the Capital and straight into danger.

The valyrian dagger shone menacingly in the Godswood, catching the light that filtered through the canopy. Once Lady Catelyn's speech was done, they all stood in serious silence, contemplating her words.

The ringing of steel shocked him from his stupor.

"If it is war they want, it is a war they will get," Robb said with passion, swinging his newly forged longsword.

Jon's hand shot out and he grabbed the thick of the blade to still it's movement, "Careful, brother," Jon's eyes were distant with memories, "you never know who you might hit on the backswing."

It was something Jeor Mormont told an enthusiastic recruit, long ago. Theon snorted, but Robb sheathed his blade with a humble smile. "As you say, Jon."

"To often, words of war become actions of war," Maester Luwin shook his head ruefully.

"Indeed," Ser Rodrik intoned. "But if not words and actions of war, what are we to do with this damning information?"

"Someone must go south, to your father." Lady Stark sheathed the dagger and strapped it to her side. She stood.

"I will go," Robb offered.

"No, there must always be a Stark in Winterfell. I will go."

"Mother!"

"Lady Stark, if this is your wish. I would gladly travel at your side." Ser Rodrik placed a hand on his heart.

"With a guard," Robb added forcefully, in his lord's voice. "I thought you were concerned for Bran?"
"I have done all I can for Bran. His life lies in the hands of the Gods. Now I must do all I can to save your father's life. Ser Rodrik," she turned to the stout knight, "I would gladly have you at my side. And you."

Jon's eyebrows rose only fractionally when Lady Catelyn directed her attention towards him.

"I am too easily recognized in the capital, as is Ser Rodrik. But with a disguise, you may be able to slip past unnoticed. You have proven your love for Bran, prove it once more."

Jon disliked her logic. Since when did Jon have to prove his love for his brothers and sisters? Love did not have to be proven. Love is wild and intangible. Freely given and freely taken. Love was a state of being that held no room for judgement.

The wind tugged at his clothes, like Ygritte's hands once did, and Jon swallowed heavily. Love…

"I will accompany you, Lady Stark."

"Good, than we leave on the morrow. We will need three of the fastest horses…"

The preparations took the latter half of the day. Jon searched for the warmest clothes he could find, and some lighter garments for the journey South of the Neck. He had never been to the Capital, so he asked other men about what they knew. Mikken gave him the most pertinent advice: "Keep your head down and keep moving. Life is faster in the city, and you'll stick out like a sore thumb if you're slow-moving."

After dinner, Jon found himself in his old room, standing in a mass of strewn furs, boots, gloves and pants. He picked up a blue tunic with holes in the bottom and tossed it aside.

As he prepared, he looked out the window and his eyes swept over the familiar stone walls of his home.

Home… Jon felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Winterfell's walls and towers used to make him feel so safe. Now, they only served to remind him of the life he could never have. A lord's life. Jon sighed and stuffed a red shirt into his traveling pack.

They would leave on the morrow. Jon wondered what this meant for him, and then he wondered what it meant for the fate of the Watch. While Jon was still recovering from the injury to his back, he had told Lady Catelyn he was waiting for Benjen to return so that he might have an escort to the Wall. But truthfully, Jon already knew his uncle had left Castle Black a month ago, in search of Ser Waymar Royce, and Benjen Stark would never return from that patrol.

Jon was leaving the North. How long it would be until he saw the Wall again? Was this the end of his watch?

… it shall not end until my death.

And what about second deaths?

Jon grabbed a pair of thick black pants and added it to the sack. The combination of red and black together jogged his memory and Jon's eyes flew to the small chest secretly stashed beneath his bed. Knowing they must travel light and swift, Jon knew he could not take the entire chest and all it's contents with him to King's Landing.

Adding a wineskin flask, a set of deerskin gloves, and after second thought, another, lighter pair of clothes, Jon finished packing swiftly. Tonight might be his last chance to peruse the chest for more
evidence surrounding his birth, he might as well do it now.

Jon cringed as the door's lock fell into place with a loud "clunk".

He felt guilty, as if the chest's contents were forbidden. He never asked Lord Stark's permission to break the lock on the chest. And the subject matter was deeply personal for them both. Lord Stark had never been forthcoming with information about Jon's birth mother, and Jon gave up asking long ago.

The last time he'd asked...

"The next time we see each other, we'll talk about your mother."

But that never came to be.

Jon washed his face, scrubbed at his teeth with a horsehair brush, and changed into his black sleeping gown. Ghost watched curiously as he closed the shutters to his small window and brought the two lanterns he owned to his bedside, casting the furs in a red glow.

Without further delay, Jon upended the chest onto the bed and the carved direwolf, blanket, and the letters poured out in confusion.

Choosing a letter at random, Jon brought the parchment to the light and settled under his covers. It was the same journal entry he had first seen in the Tall Tower. The date at the top of the page was smudged and illegible. Chaotic scribbles covered large sections of the wrinkled page, as if the author attempted to erase what was written, and then threw away the parchment.

"Father's handwriting," Jon told Ghost. Ghost lay stretched out, fully pressed against Jon's side. The direwolf pup had grown handsomely in the past month.

"...I am grateful the boy does not have his father's hair. I could explain away the eyes, knowing my public affairs Ashara, but the hair? Cat does not know and I cannot break my promise. I will not. We are still not close, she looks at me with suspicion and guards her words in my presence. I know the boy draws her ire. She hates-" here the words were scribbled again. The ink is blotched and the paper was torn and wrinkled. Jon's eyes skipped to the bottom half of the page. "I tested him with the fire and he shows no evidence of the blood. The babe has not forgiven me for burning his foot. It was a small injury, and I quickly soothed the mark."

Jon broke away to stare at the tear shaped birthmark on right foot. A birthmark. Not a burn. The rest of the page was destroyed by water. Jon cast the paper aside and chose another.

A nagging voice in the back of his mind asked: Who was this babe his father spoke of?

No. Jon thought, as he smoothed out another scrap of parchment. The letter spoke of his "father's hair" and Ned Stark was his father. It must have been some other child.

"To the Smiling Tree. I believe I have knowledge of thee. You have bewitched me with your laughter, your dancing lance, your enchanting voice. I remain yours. Meet me tonight under the eyes of your Heart Tree. Your Silver Prince."

Jon's mind whirled. The Smiling Tree. The Knight of the Smiling Tree. The unknown competitor at the tourney of Harrenhal, Jon had heard a story about the Knight of the Smiling Tree once. The Knight was a passing oddity at the tourney that started Robert's Rebellion. These were the words of a lover or a suitor. Who was the Silver Prince? A Targaryen?
Did Rhaegar Targaryen have a preference for men? Jon's eyes widened and he snickered at the thought. Ghost shifted restlessly in his sleep. Jon cast that paper away.

"Ned, I am safe at the Tower of Joy with my protectors but I grieve for the news you have given me. Ride at first light. I am not long for this world."

Jon stared at the unfamiliar handwriting. The feminine curls and loops tugged at his heart. Were these the last words of his mother? Unbidden, tears pricked at his eyes. The words "I am not long for this world" blurred under his shaking hands. Jon suddenly felt exhausted and drained of energy. Turning on his side, he blew out the lantern and hugged Ghost to his chest.

The last thing he saw before falling asleep was the dried, dead silhouette of a lone winter rose.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Just to explain, I imagined that Ned Stark couldn't bring himself to burn the last memories he had of his sister. So, he hid the last of her belongings, and a few of his own, in the Tall Tower. The tower was condemned, unused, crowded by unwanted things, and the chest had a lock. The Targaryen sigil on a blanket will be mentioned by Ned later. I think it could be a believable occurrence, and it's in the story summary that Jon finds these letters.

Two things:

(1) I broke my update Saturday rule because this chapter is short.

(2) The timing of certain events WILL BE out of order.
Ser Sand

Chapter Summary

Jon enters King's Landing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon reveled in the spray of the salt water, and the power of the galley's sixty oars, pushing them forward against the tide. Catelyn Stark stood at the head of the *Storm Dancer*, talking to Moreo Tumitis. The Tyroshi captain had a green forked beard and a clever tongue.

At White Harbor, Catelyn and Ser Rodrik had been drawn to the large galley, its charming crew, and especially, the captain's boasts about her speed and maneuverability. Jon was less convinced, but early on in the trip he had silently vowed not to voice his opinions aloud, lest he destroy the unspoken truce between himself and Lady Stark. The truth was, he felt the ship could have fared better against the two storms they had faced, and the captain was too well-groomed for his liking.

Ser Rodrik heaved over the ship’s broadside once more and Jon patted him sympathetically on the back. The master-at-arms was suffering from an seemingly unending bout of seasickness, and he had been forced to shave his characteristic white whiskers in favor of a clean face. The knight had not seemed the same afterwards.

Jon could commiserate. He felt the same after looking into the mirror for the first time after his time leap. The scars from Orell's eagle had faded into nothingness, as if the talon's never broke his face, and the shaggy beard he had been cultivating as Lord Commander was shaven to a stubble. He did not look like himself. Every time he faced the mirror a stranger greeted him. The only thing that remained the same from his last life was the haunted, aged look in his eyes.

Jon touched his unblemished, shaven cheek. The galley rose and fell steadily with the waves, soothing his erratic thoughts. *With this new life, I shall make new scars.*

"Jon."

Lady Catelyn had taken to calling him that. Jon. His name.

Jon bowed. The longer he avoided her eyes, the less likely she was to become displeased with him. Catelyn's attitude and behavior toward her husband's bastard had improved. They always made a point to avoid one another, but on the journey here she entrusted him with simple tasks worthy of a squire. Jon would prepare their horses and fetch the wood in the wilds, and on the rare occasion they stopped at an inn, Jon would politely stand guard to Ser Rodrik and Lady Catelyn's conversations.

They were not the duties of a lord commander - in fact, Jon should have been insulted - but her nod of approval held a greater amount of respect and the hateful comments seemed to stop altogether, which was the greatest gift he could have asked for. Lately, all he wanted was some peace and quiet to think and plot for the future.

"We will dock tomorrow. Prepare your things."
Jon only needed to be told once. With eager steps, he returned to his quarters (which were also Ser Rodrik's quarters) and began to gather the knight's belongings as well as his own.

He oiled and sharpened Sweetsinger, wondering what they would do about his direwolf pup once they reached the city. Ghost did not enjoy their trip over sea, if his shaking legs and lolling head were any indication. If the wolf could whine, Jon was certain the beast would be making a racket. Fortunately, the pup was silent and still small enough to pass as a large dog. Jon hoped he would stay that way for a little while longer, but since he could recall Ghost's many growth spurts, he wouldn't bet on it. Within the year, he'd be the size of a small horse.

Sheathing the blade, Jon joined the other men in the mess hall. He paused briefly at the door, and then, in a split second decision, sorted through his belongings to find the stack of parchment from the small, winter rose chest. Hiding them underneath his arms, he left his rooms.

Upon their departure from Winterfell, Jon had decided to keep the papers from the chest in case they proved to be useful later. For personal edification, he said as an excuse to himself. He rolled each piece of parchment into a tight scroll and bundled the scrolls with a leather strip. After some thought, he also folded the Targaryen sigil into as small a square as he could manage, and placed it at the bottom of his satchel, unable to deny that he felt a connection to the large swath of fabric.

He couldn't stop himself from imagining his mother, with loving eyes and gentle hands, wrapping Jon the Babe in its velvety warmth. It was a only a concocted fantasy, but a fantasy that comforted Jon nonetheless.

During their race south, Jon hadn't dared open any of the letters. Ser Rodrik, Lady Catelyn and Jon had taken the three fastest mounts Winterfell could provide, and rode hard for White Harbor. The few nights they slept under the stars, their camp was small and Jon tread carefully around the Lady of Winterfell and her loyal master-at-arms.

Jon obeyed Old Ser Rodrik's every command without complaint, acting as his temporary squire for the duration of the trip. The arms trainer had always been cordial to Ned Stark's bastard. Jon felt that Rodrik was warming to him when they shared a pipe together one night, and the older man shared with him stories of his youth.

Jon believed Lady Catelyn would react poorly to any evidence of his mother and his bastard birth. He also feared she would destroy the letters in a fit a rage. But now, in the anonymity of the Storm Dancer's mess hall, with Lady Stark and Ser Rodrik otherwise preoccupied, he was free to investigate the contents of the Winter Rose Chest once more.

Choosing a seat in the shadows, Jon signalled for one of the men to bring him whatever water they could spare. He tossed the man a penny, and the Lyseni caught it with his toes. Jon blinked.

Unraveling the bundle, and careful not to lose any of the papers, Jon selected a short, hastily scribbled missive, written in red ink.

"Lord Stark, I still hold hope for peace. Your accusations are false. I cannot divulge Lyanna's location, but know that she is safe. Together, we might move against Aerys and settle this war without bloodshed. Prince Rhaegar of House Targaryen."

Jon contemplated the dead prince's words. Rhaegar Targaryen attempted an olive branch with House Stark? These small facts were not written in the history books. The handwriting was pristine and careful, and it did not match the small missive from the Silver Prince to the Knight of the Smiling Tree. Then again, great men have great scribes. There was no evidence Prince Rhaegar wrote any of these notes with his own hand.
Jon placed the note to the side and picked up another piece of parchment. This one looked to be another journal entry, dated 283 AC. His heart soared at the sight of the now familiar loops and curls of his mother’s script.

*Mother told me to follow my heart. Father told me to listen to the Gods. I have done both. I have never loved anyone as much as I love him, and I will follow my love wherever they take me. I only hope I have chosen the path to happiness and not the path to war. There is hope still. There is hope in the seed that has quickened in my womb. I am filled with joy at the thought of them. Will they take after their father? A thousand questions fill my mind and I would be pleased with any answer. The Gods have given me life.*

Jon traced the pattern of her script. *There is hope still.* Jon smiled and felt himself growing teary. Gods, he was growing more sentimental with age. *I am filled with joy…* he traced those words with a grin-

"Jon."

Jon startled and the bundle went crashing to the floor. He quickly bowed and gathered the parchment before it went rolling away. Lady Catelyn gave him a cold stare and plucked a page from the floor.

Jon's heart plummeted. This was the end.

Catelyn Stark handed back the parchment wordlessly. "My own Maester hardly left without handing me my studies. Make sure your things are gathered and wake early," she added dismissively.

Jon took the excuse readily and accepted the proffered page with as much grace and ease as he could summon, although his heart was beating painfully against his ribs. Without another word, he bowed and fled to the small shared cabin. At the door, he paused and turned. Catelyn Stark was watching him with cold blue eyes. The emotion present was one that he had seen on Samwell Tarly's face, all too often.

Curiosity.

Docking the large vessel took less time than Jon had thought. Forty deck hands moved in synchrony, tying and knotting and shouting to one another in a frantic dance. Jon stood at the bow with Ser Rodrik, listening as the sailor's shouts mix with the cry of seagulls.

They arrived at King's Landing on time, in the early morn. A red sun illuminated the bay, or perhaps it was a trick of the light, and the sun was yellow and the great keep was red. Either way, it appeared as if the world had been bathed in fire that morning. At least, that was how Jon Snow saw it.

The city was a furnace, heat rolled off the rocks in visible waves. Sweat dripped down his back and matted his hair to his forehead. Already he had discarded his coat in favor of a simple leather vest and tunic. No wonder the new recruits from King's Landing never seemed to adjust to the cold at the Wall. Jon didn't think he'd ever adjust to the heat, but he was faring better than some of the sailors who'd come down from the North, who couldn't bear to be in the sun too long.

In the distance, Jon could make out the massive, looming structure of the Red Keep, overlooking the Bay and the Narrow Sea. They had passed underneath it just after dawn. Jon stared at the seven tall towers of the Red Keep, wondering which of those might be the Tower of the Hand. The Keep was impressive, an awe-inspiring sight, with towers that pierced low hanging clouds. The beauty of the city was sharply contrasted by the ugliness of its slums and the persistent smell that emanated from...
As they prepared to dock, Lady Catelyn informed him that they would seek an inn in the city, someplace discreet, and Ser Rodrik would deliver a message to Lord Stark.

Ghost was packaged into a cramped barrel for travel. Jon felt for his friend. The barrel would be hot and uncomfortable, and Ghost preferred wide, open lands, and the smell of pine. Lady Catelyn and Ser Rodrik disembarked first, already talking in low voices about their plans. Jon was left behind to manage Ghost’s barrel.

"Farewell, young lad." Captain Moreo shook his hand firmly. "Watch after your lady. She is either very brave, or very foolish." Catelyn Stark was busy cloaking her hair with a blue scarf while they spoke. Jon smiled and agreed.

"If you’re ever in need of a swift vessel..." The captain left it at that. Jon filled in the rest: *And if I ever want to be robbed at the same time...*

"I’ll remember the name, Captain Moreo," Jon said instead, and smiled genially.

Disembarking from the *Storm Dancer*, Jon followed Lady Stark and Ser Rodrik at a slight distance. Ghost knocked about in the barrel as it was carried down the gangplank, so Jon snuck a hand underneath it's top and stroked the direwolf's fur. "Alright now," he whispered. "Stealthy and quiet we must be, until we can meet Father." Jon was charged with bringing the direwolf into the city, and he wouldn't risk Lady Catelyn's wrath by drawing unnecessary attention.

"Lady Stark!" Jon’s eyes left Ghost's barrel in time to catch a set of armored men approaching.

Jon had never seen Gold Cloaks before. The mounted pair made an intimidating sight, cutting a swath through the crowd directly toward the lady. Their pointed hats soared far above the heights of the crowd, a mirror of the numerous towers that dotted the cityscape.

The rustle of chainmail, in tandem with the click of horse hoofs, gave an unspoken warning to the inhabitants of King's Landing. *These men are dangerous*, Jon thought. *The common people shy away from them.*

In response to his tension, the fur underneath his hand bristled in anger. Ser Rodrik's hand drifted immediately to the sword at his hip and Jon followed his lead, pushing his brown cloak over the hilt so that it might be seen. However, he was still a good ten or fifteen feet away from the confrontation.

"Welcome to King's Landing. Follow us."

Sweetsinger's hilt was leatherbound and soft under his grip, Jon stalked closer. If it came to blows, he could take one man by surprise while Ser Rodrik dispatched the other. Jon tried to communicate this plan to the old knight, but Rodrik would not meet his eye, and behind his back, the knight signalled for Jon to stay put with an open palm.

Although their request was issued as a command, neither Gold Cloak moved to turn around, as if expecting the sharp retort, "We’ve done nothing wrong!"

"We've been instructed to escort you into the city," the first man said. Jon detected a hint of an accent, similar to Pip's. This man was a Southerner, through and through. Lady Stark gave a loud protest which was cut short by a rolled paper handed to her, "Follow me, Lady Stark."

The Gold Cloaks turned without another word, expecting the lady to follow (and what choice did they have?), with nary a glance toward Jon and the conspicuous barrel. Jon moved to trail after the
party, but Lady Stark's sharp gaze nailed him to the dock's street. The Cloaks had not noticed his presence, and it seemed the lady wanted it to remain that way. Before he could shout or say anything, Ser Rodrik flung his coinpurse at Jon's head and the former lord commander caught it with a stifled yelp of surprise.

Lady Stark's plan worked; he was alone in a city of over half a million people.

Jon stood with a lost expression. He stuck his hand in the barrel, to confirm his wolf was still alive and well. Ghost licked his palm and it was then that Jon remembered the inn on Eel Alley where Lady Stark stayed as a child. *I shall wait there, for word from Lord and Lady Stark… Jon decided. I have no other option.*

Jon's feet moved of their own accord then, across the burnt cobblestone and into the great labyrinth of the lower city. Small, cramped streets were combined with grand broadways that stretched across every directional. The city was so large, Jon immediately feared getting lost.

He stopped to ask a dockhand, a lad of fifteen, where to find the Street of Sisters. The grubby but remarkably muscular boy scratched his head and gave a mix of directions Jon could barely understand, but he thanked the boy anyway and offered him a penny to carry Ghost's barrel.

"Your barrel is moving," the boy commented. Jon nodded and twirled another penny in his hand. The lad's blue eyes lit up and he pushed through the crowd toward the mud gate.

"Go through Mud and Fishes," said the boy. Jon followed a myriad of smells: saltwater, seaweed, cooked fish with lemon, and found the Fishmonger's Square. Tall brick buildings were built into one another. From the windows, Jon could see women beating rugs and hanging dresses. A small group of children with bare chests (even the young girls) were playing with marbles and chalk, squealing when a seagull swooped and snatched a dead fish from the alley nearby. "Take the Steel." Jon spotted the painted sign for the Street of Steel. A fat merchant was boasting his wares in front of the entrance, and Jon narrowly avoided the merchant's fair haired daughter who was split between leering at him lasciviously and glancing with purpose at his coin purse. The lad laughed uproariously at Jon's discomfort as he skirted away from her tugging hands.

"Follow," the boy then said. Jon jogged to keep up with the lad's skinny legs, fearful of losing the only guide he had, who was also carrying his direwolf.

It seemed they climbed for ages. They passed more people than Jon could count, and brothels, shops, houses, and manses besides. The city people were everywhere, climbing steps, emptying pots, drawing water, vending wares, and shouting, shouting, shouting until Jon needed to break for a moment and breathe. The boy was hardly bothered by it all, but Jon couldn't help but be irked by the constant brushing of arms and legs. And the noise!

"Are there always so many people?" he asked aloud.

"Always," said the boy, with a grin. His bare chest and bare feet contrasted with the richness of the Street of Steel. Combined with Jon's clearly Northern looks and dark clothing, they made an outrageous pair. "Sometimes more."

Closer and closer to Visenya's Hill they drew, until Jon could see the great seven spires of the Great Sept of Baelor, and the enormous shadow it cast.

*Eel Alley.* Jon looked triumphantly at the inn's sign. The boy tottered after him, with Ghost's heavy barrel in his arms, until the inn's thatched roof came into view.
Jon shook the dust off his cloak in relief, and entered the inn. A bell attached to door sounded prettily and a raven-haired maiden one or two years his junior entered the sitting room to take his cloak and satchel. A broad-faced man then slid in front of Jon and grinned toothily.

"Ah, young ser, looking for room and board?" The man's voice and face reminded Jon of a large frog. "Come for the Hand's tourney? We have the best establishment here, the Painted Lady Inn boasts the finest meals gold can buy- you, cur. Out."

The boy dropped the barrel without care and sneered, then turned to Jon expectantly. Three pennies later, and ten silver coins for the room, Jon was being led up a spiraling staircase into the upper floors of the inn by the froggy man.

"Breakfast and dinner served at the young ser's desire, our kitchen is always running. Young Dalia here, one of my many servants," - he gestured to the maiden from before, who was struggling to carry the barrel behind them - "is available to answer any of your questions and for a small fee, lead you anywhere into the city that the young ser desires. Here, on Eel Alley, we are honored to host the Knights of the King's Tourney. Ser…?"

"Jon Sand," Jon filled in, without a thought, thinking of the Pale Snakewood direwolf and his mother's slanted script.

"Ser Sand." To his credit, the innkeep - or manservant, or whatever he was - did not flinch to hear his bastard surname. The three stopped in front of a red painted door and Jon was handed the key. "We hope your stay here, at the Painted Lady, is pleasant and accommodating. Do not hesitate to call."

With a click, the innkeeper turned on his heel and left smartly. Jon took a moment to stare at the key, the lock, and the waiting maiden before opening the door and ushering the laboring lady inside.

"Apologies for my uncle, ser," the maiden said, when he handed her a penny. "Bit of a prude. But he won't bother you much, as long as your coin is good."

Jon couldn't help the smile that graced his face at that comment. Once the girl was gone and the room was empty again, Jon hurried to pry open the barrel, and Ghost stumbled out of it's confines, shaking and wheezing. The direwolf looked pleadingly at Jon for relief, so Jon upended a water pitcher over the wolf's head. Once, twice, three times. Unable to find any more pitchers, Jon drank from his waterskin and stripped off his clothes.

There was nothing to do but wait and sleep.

A sopping wet, but much happier Ghost climbed onto the bed and collapsed at Jon's side. The open window allowed a light breeze into the room, but it did nothing to relieve the heat.

"Well," Jon closed his eyes, "until Father calls, if I am Ser Sand, you are Ser Ghost."

Ghost huffed and rubbed his nose into Jon's arm.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I feel like it's worth mentioning once more that this is an AU story. It does not take place in the book or TV universe. This is another semi-short chapter. Hang in there for
Ch. 5, which I think has some really juicy stuff (I think I'll post it Wednesday since I'm running out of time before my next semester starts).

Also, if I could go to a city in Westeros, it would NOT be King's Landing. That place sounds overcrowded and gross (not to mention the poverty situation sounds whack).

If you do review, what city would you go to? I'm thinking Oldtown. Sounds pretty sexy.
Lord Stark Calls

Chapter Summary

Lord Stark calls on Jon at the inn. Jon draws the attention of Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarrion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was another fortnight before Lord Stark called upon him.

In the meantime, the inn was a bustle of activity. Lord's sons, hedge knights, landed knights, sworn swords and sellswords alike came to fight in the tourney. Jon Sand became a regular figure in the dining hall, although he tended to keep to himself rather than mingle in the company of noblemen.

Of those staying at the Painted Lady, the most notable were: Ser Patrick and Lord Jason Mallister, several of Lord Frey's sons and grandsons that Jon had difficulty telling apart from one another, the infamous Thoros of Myr who arrived in the city early to drink himself into oblivion each night, and finally Lord Beric Dondarrion, whose presence was so awe-inspiring that the other knights crowded round him each night for tales of war and intrigue.

During the day, Jon breakfasted early to avoid the crowd and left the inn to explore the city. The first morning he woke, the grubby boy was waiting outside the inn with an expectant face. Jon paid him two silver coins to take him to a clothing vendor and show him around Visenya's Hill. The lad had eagerly appeared each day after that, but Jon was forced to send him away eventually, unable to spend any more coin.

King's Landing was a bottomless pit for coins, it seemed. Jon was forced to purchase lighter clothing, new boots for the street, and even spent a few coppers to get his hair trimmed short and close like the other men's. Jon was loathe to part with his hair, but it was too hot for his typical Northern mane, and the less he looked like his lord father, the better. He'd even taken to shaving regularly, which he knew Ned Stark often failed to do.

Late at night, he took Ghost to the inn's small courtyard and let the wolf run around the hedges and chew on fallen branches from the tall redwood tree that grew there. It was not nearly enough for his free-spirited familiar, but it would have to suffice. The innkeeper made him pay extra to house the large wolf and threatened Jon with eviction if Ghost bit anyone.

Jon was caught during one of these nighttime session by a shadowy figure standing in the stone archway that led to the stairs.

Jon froze, silent as a statue, unable to read the other man's dark features. Ghost padded to his side with hackles raised. The figure was leaning against the red stone, but he straightened and stepped into the light when the direwolf approached.

"By the Gods," Lord Dondarrion breathed. "What creature do you bring with you to the capital, Ser? A wolf or a myth? Do mine eyes deceive me?"
Jon hesitated and put a hand on Ghost to stop his progress. The wolf was still a pup but growing larger and fiercer every day. He did not yet reach the monstrous height of his ancestors, but his large paws and long snout marked him for a direwolf, "Your eyes remain true, my lord. A direwolf."

The Lord took several steps forward and sunk to the ground with an outstretched hand. Ghost sniffed the hand and after a tense moment, in which the direwolf gazed into the Lord's eyes with alarming intelligence, licked the knuckles. A wagging tail thumped against Jon's leg and the lord chuckled merrily.

"I have never seen one. Thought they were a legend." The man tilted his head to survey him, likely taking in the pale complexion and dark hair. "You are from the North. Here to fight in your lord hand's tourney as I am?"

Lord Dondarrion rose to his feet. The Lightning Lord was tall, Jon's height, with red-gold hair and handsome features. He wore a loose black tunic with white stars stitched into the chest and a forked purple lightning bolt traveled from his left shoulder to his right hip. Jon was relieved to see the light haze of alcohol in his eyes. *He may not yet remember this meeting when he wakes on the morrow.*

"I would have your name, stranger. I have seen you in this inn and I pride myself in knowing the name of each man I have met. Yet you, you remain quiet. Skulking in the corners."


"Jon Sand?" The Lightning Lord furrowed his brow, in obvious disbelief.

"My mother was Dornish, my father was from the North," Jon filled in the story.

"Ah, sword or lance? Or perhaps bow and arrow suit you better?"

"Sword." Jon patted the hilt at his side.

"Hmm, you shall be contending against my friend, Ser Thoros, then. I do not envy you lad." The Lord gave a hearty laugh that filled the courtyard. "I will be tilting myself, because it is the popular sport and I am a popular man. I shall look for you, Jon Sand."

Jon bowed. "I wish you luck in your tilts, my Lord."

"And you, in the melee."

The Lord left the yard with one last pat to Ghost. Jon exhaled in relief, and then inhaled in terror. At the doorway, Lord Beric met with a stumbling, red figure that could only be Thoros of Myr. They were speaking animatedly. With a respectful nod, Jon left before the Red Priest could approach him about the melee.

The next morning, Jon did not break his fast early enough. Without warning, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and Jon knew without looking that the knight and lord were standing at his side. Lord Dondarrion ordered boiled eggs and mead in the background over his head.

"Ser Sand! I hear we shall cross blades soon on tourney grounds!" Thoros of Myr had a boisterous voice that echoed in the rafters. Several sets of sleepy and curious eyes turned on Jon, and the bastard knew his anonymity had passed.

"Thoros of Myr." Jon inclined his head and stood. "It is my honor."

The Red Priest was of a similar height to him, although Jon was an inch taller. For such a small
height differential, it filled Jon with a strange courage. After all, he was the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. Although a bastard, he had led the Battle for Castle Black with honor, and fought with a ferocity that even Mance Rayder and King Stannis admired.

Thoros looked at him with an appraising smile. "Oh dear, if I were a little younger and less experienced, I would fear that glint in your eyes, Ser Sand."

"Jon." Jon stuck out his hand. "You would be right to."

Lord Dondarrion burst out in laughter and Thoros grinned toothily. "Ah, finally. A worthy opponent. And here I was, looking for your bravery in all these other lords and knights and trueborn sons." Thoros swept his red arms wide to gesture to the room that was growing in occupants. Jon did not appreciate the gibe but reigned in his annoyance, "What do you know of the Gods, Jon?"

There is only one God, Jon Snow. Melisandre's voice ricocheted around his head.

"Close to nothing," Jon lied.

"Than I am truly sorry to inform you, that I shall be winning the melee. The one true God has shown me my victory, and I am certain."

Lord Dondarrion groaned and slammed his mug onto the table nearby. "Not this hogwash again."

Jon did not like the look on Thoros' face. It was the same look Melissandre often showed. A look of conceit and certainty. The Red God should have chosen its followers more carefully. A little humility might have served their religious order far better.

Jon placed a hand on the hilt of Sweetsinger and sat down again. "If I know anything of the Gods, it is that their favor can change in the time it takes a sword to swing. Perhaps next time, R'hllor will show you eating mud."

Thoros' smile fell. "Who told you that name? Jon who knows nothing of the Gods?"

"Enough," Dondarrion had tired of the conversation and pulled Thoros backward with a sharp tug. "This is not the place for your preaching, priest."

Jon stood quickly. I should not have said that, he thought, clutching Sweetsinger at his side. Leaving the inn in a hurry, he almost barreled into an old, familiar friend.

"Ser Jory!" Jon exclaimed, in a hushed voice.

The knight righted him, but did not return the greeting. Jory Cassel wore a grim but determined face. The knight was armored in mail and boiled leather, despite the heat of the afternoon sun. Jon thought that odd, until he saw the silent figure behind him.

"Ser Jory!" Jon exclaimed, in a hushed voice.

The knight righted him, but did not return the greeting. Jory Cassel wore a grim but determined face. The knight was armored in mail and boiled leather, despite the heat of the afternoon sun. Jon thought that odd, until he saw the silent figure behind him.

"Jon," a deep voice sounded.

Lord Stark sat on a tall brown stallion. Jon rejoiced to see him. It was a welcome sight after so long surrounded by strangers. Meeting for the first time in the capital, Jon was struck by the difference time could make. Lord Stark was dressed formally, in rich silks and a long cape. One of the Stark household guard carried his banner beside him, something Jon had not seen Lord Stark do in Winterfell or Wintertown.

A man he would once have run to and embraced. But now, in front of the Painted Lady Inn, Jon bowed.
"Lord Stark," he said. "I thought you might not call."

"Come." Lord Stark gestured for him to take the reins of the mare that Jory proffered. "We will speak as we ride."

Jon leapt onto the horse eagerly and together, the party rode toward the Street of Steel. Lord Stark took up a quick trot that sent the common folk scuttling away. Jon was at once amazed at how quickly the Hand's presence changed the city's atmosphere. The common folk bowed and scraped and called "Lord Hand", "Long Live the Hand", "Stark! Stark!" at his passing. Everywhere, smiles blossomed and Jon saw no sign of the grimmer streets that he journeyed everyday.

*What privilege the Stark name brings.* The same privilege all family names brought. But Jon was not a Stark, and never would be.

"Why did you come, Jon?" Lord Stark said, turning a corner.

"At Lady Stark's bidding. Is she well? I have not seen sign of her, nor Ser Rodrick since entering the city."

"I have sent my lady wife North, as I should have sent you. Yet, Cat insisted you should remain and serve me faithfully. I do not pretend to know her meaning," Lord Stark said gruffly.

There was no affection in his voice. Jon felt his heart clench painfully but soldiered on.

"Lady Stark is wise." Jon nodded toward the Red Keep. "You will need friends of Stark in the city and a ready sword."

Lord Stark came to an abrupt halt and vaulted off his horse. Jon took in the sight of Tobho Mott's infamous shop. The grubby boy from the docks had told him it was vastly overpriced, when Jon inquired, and directed him instead to the city's other armorers. At the inn, Jon had heard the master armorer's name mentioned once or twice by the knight's. The men spoke of him with equal amounts of respect and frustration. An artist of steel, and a con artist for coin.

"Tobho Mott's?" Jon frowned.

"Aye," Lord Stark swung his horse around, blocking the shop and the street from view. Jon was cornered in between his own mare and the dark figure of Ned Stark. "Jon," Lord Stark sighed, "you should not have come. This is a dangerous place."

**The Wall is more dangerous**, Jon wanted to say, **and you sent me there anyway. With thieves and rapers and sellswords alike, to defend the realm from ghouls and wildlings and dead things.**

"Yet… I am strangely glad to have you. You are right. I am in need of friends and men I can trust. It is fortunate you have come, because I not only trust you, but I know you can think for yourself." Lord Stark looked left and right and signalled to Jory. At once, Jory's horse neighed and reared in displeasure, drowning out their conversation. "The knife sent to kill Bran belonged to the imp. The murder you thwarted, I suspect, is somehow connected to the murder of Jon Arryn." Jon's eyebrows rose but said nothing. Jory's horse snorted and pounded it's hooves against the stone. "I am close to uncovering the reasons behind these plots. What I need now, Jon, is your silent obedience."

"I am at your service," - Jon bowed - "silently."

"Good." Lord Stark nodded.

*Lord Tyrion?* Jon mind was filled with memories of the halfman, the only lord to visit the Night's
Watch, besides his father, in the past decade. Tyrion, who laughed and drank and sang.

The catalyst, Jon's eyes widened. *Tyrion is taken by Lady Catelyn, and the Lord of the Westerlands responds to the threat on his son's life.*

"No," Jon said, "The assassin we apprehended in Winterfell said the knife was sent by a young, blond noble. Tyrion is blonde, somewhat young, but obviously a dwarf. That would be worth mentioning, methinks."

"Hm," - Lord Stark rubbed his beard and looked thoughtful - "Rodrik mentioned the same."

"Because it is true." Jon back an irritated sigh, "You must send word for Lady Catelyn to release Lord Tyrion, at once." His words were rushed, he was hurried by the memory of events that would soon come to fruition. Jon needed to combat this. Immediately.

Lord Stark's frown deepened. "Do not presume to command me or my lady wife, Jon."

Jon bit back a sigh of frustration. "Either the assassin is lying, or your information is false. Who told you the knife was Lord Tyrion's? A man you trust?"

Jon knew he struck a nerve there. Lord Stark's eyes widened and grew distant, thinking of the man who told him these lies. *A city of snakes, Jon thought, there is no one he can trust here.*

"You have given your council," Lord Stark finally decided to say, "learn to leave it in silence."

The rebuke stung and Jon's mouth snapped shut. The game he was playing was delicate and far too refined for the former Lord Commander. He was a military man, not a politician.

They entered the armorer's shop together. A serving girl noticed the direwolf sigil etched into Lord Stark's doublet and immediately showed him further into the large house, toward the bellows in the back. Jon trailed behind, with a hand on his sword and a hard look at the crowd gathered to purchase armor. A few familiar faces from the Painted Lady cropped up. Ser Emmon Frey glowered at him, and a burly sellsword, Gunsworth, gave him a wry grin. "Ser Sand!" he called, but Jon only had time to raise a hand in response.

The Hand was shown into a cool sitting room. Jon took the adjacent seat and admired the ironwrought candelabra placed in front of them. Each unlit candle sat in the mouth of an open dragon's mouth. Jon did not think that King Robert would appreciate the symbolism. Lord Stark glanced at the metalwork and then placed it to the side.

"Ser Sand?" The Hand looked expectantly at his bastard.

"I thought it unwise to name myself in true." Jon said earnestly. "A lie closer to the truth, is an easier lie to tell." Sam once told him that. Sam always told him useful things.

"And your sword?" Lord Stark pointed at the blade Jon had stuck to his hip.

"The king's gift," he showed him the hilt. Since they parted on bad terms, Jon hadn't had the chance to share the king's gift with his father.

Jon found the weight of the longsword both comforting and comfortable so he had taken to wearing it wherever he went. During his time at the Watch, Longclaw was always at his side. Jon remembered the Valyrian steel sword wistfully. If only it could be salvaged in his new life. Would it be lost with Jeor Mormont during the Great Ranging?
"And your hair? And clothes?"

Questions. Lately, it was always questions between himself and Father. *Have you nothing to ask of where I've been or what I've done?* Jon swallowed this thought dryly. *This isn't my first time as a man on the inside,* he wanted to say. *I lay with a wildling girl.* But that made no sense and Lord Stark might send him away if he started speaking nonsense.

"All the better to disguise myself," he replied. "I am not certain as to my success, but I have remained unharassed."

"Better you than Catelyn," Lord Stark mused quietly to himself. "My lady has a temper."

Tobho Mott appeared and - as Jon suspected - began to boast of his unequaled work. Lord Stark let the armorer go on for a while before directing the conversation toward Jon Arryn's last visit, to the blacksmith's displeasure. Soon, they were being led back toward the heat of the furnace to see "the boy". The door to the forge opened and a rush of heat billowed out in waves. Jon felt his body buzz as he walked into the darkened room.

"The boy", or Gendry, was just a dark haired lad, younger than Jon but prouder by far. Jon listened to the conversation between Tobho Mott and his father, noting Jon Arryn's special interest in the lad, and observed the bull's head helmet. After the investigation was done Lord Stark paused and ordered a set of leather bracers, with a glance toward his bastard. Jon understood the undercurrent and inclined his head.

Outside the shop Jon was handed the reins of the mare once more.

"Take her, for whatever you need," Lord Stark said. "It is too dangerous to meet frequently. I will send you instructions or I will call on you."

His father looked to be waiting for something, so Jon nodded. After he mounted, Jon managed to speak.

"Pale Snakewood."

Lord Stark paused and looked up at his bastard.

"I chose the name Sand because I found the Pale Snakewood and the sigil it was buried with. Along with the papers."

The Hand of the King was mute and Jon knew, in an instant, why Northmen were called wolves. Angry, silver dagger-like eyes pierced Jon Snow's confidence. Lord Stark's white knuckled hands clenched his leather reins and a dark cloud cast them in shadow.

"You best forget that," said Lord Stark in a deathly quiet voice, the warning clear. "You weren't supposed to be there."

"I could never forget." Jon responded in kind, marshalling the man inside him. "Do not ask me to."

Jon galloped away, leaving the Street of Steel and the Hand of the King far behind. The cry of "JON!" nearly made him stop but he could not turn back now. The mare stampeded through the crowd.

Without the Stark sigil Jon was soon swarmed by the common folk and he slowed to a walk to prevent any unfortunate accidents. He turned the mare onto Eel Alley and found the grubby boy waiting for him once again. "Take your horse, Ser," he offered. Jon handed him the reins wordlessly
and another bronze coin. The boy grinned toothily and led the panting mare into the inn's stables.

At the door, Thoros was waiting for him. The Red Priest was holding a wine flask in one hand and a horn in the other. Charming, Jon thought.

"I checked the lists," The Red Priest eyes gleamed. "Ser Sand was not on them." Jon was not in the mood to entertain the fat man. He tried to move past but Thoros shot out a red cloaked fist and blocked his path. "I did you the honor of penning your name, Ser Sand. I spoke with the tourney organizers at great length and with my friend, Lord Beric. You have been given permission to compete! A great honor for a bastard and a non-knight, no less. Although," he paused to draw from the horn, "you are a Ser, if anyone asks."

Jon froze and turned his anger onto the Red Priest. Thoros looked positively smug.

"I did not ask for your assistance," Jon snarled. The priest only laughed and took a swig of wine. "You should not meddle in the affairs of others. But it seems the servants of the Red God cannot help themselves."

"Have you met another of my order?" Thoros smiled wanely.

"Oh yes," Jon stepped close. "I know your kind."

Thoros shook his head. It seemed to Jon that he shook off some of his afternoon drunkenness too. The Red Priest began to chuckle and smirk, "That is where you are wrong. Or maybe. Maybe you're right. The night is dark and full-

"Do not preach to me about the night," Jon practically spat, his patience gone, his vision narrowed to a small point. "I have seen the Others. Your Red Priestess could not stop them. Your Red God could not stop them. Nothing will. They will reap and rape and murder and bring a cold darkness on these lands that will last a generation and you will not laugh. You will not laugh to see their blue eyes and cold hands and the dead things they will summon."

Jon knew he had said too much but he was angry. Today had been taxing, emotionally exhausting, and Thoros' interference may just have ruined his anonymity. There was no Ser Sand. They'd be asking more questions now.

And yet, he felt a small sliver of satisfaction at seeing the Red Priest's mouth grow slack and the horn tumble from his hand. It clattered to the ground and was lost in the milieu of the crowds.

"Do you believe?" Thoros' beard twitched excitedly. "Have you seen this in the flames? Because… because I have doubted."

"Close the door!" The innkeeper shouted.

Jon stalked past Thoros of Myr and hastened to his room. He was tired and agitated by the day's events. Thoros followed him doggedly. "Ser Sand, have you looked into the flames? Ser Sand!" Jon pushed his way through the singing knights in the dining room and into the courtyard. The stairs were in view and still Thoros did not cease his questions. "Where have you seen the Night, Ser Sand? Will you look into the flames tonight?"

Jon ran up the spiral steps, a set of feet followed him close behind. With a slightly panicked breath he reached his rooms and fumbled for the keys. The door unlocked with merciful speed and Jon had the distinct pleasure of slamming it in Thoros of Myr's face.

"Ser Sand!"
"Jon! I was once faithful... I have seen things, magical things, I could not believe. Voices I can never unhear. Fire I could touch. I was sent to Westeros and I thought the Red God a lost cause. I dreamt a dream and could never dream again. Jon, renew my faith."

Jon took several shuddering breaths before sinking to the floor. Ghost wagged his tail and padded happily to his side.

"Ser Sand!" the Red Priest pounded on the door. Jon pounded back and the noise stopped. For a few blissful seconds Jon thought he was alone and the priest had withdrawn.

"They say there is only one God," - Thoros had stooped to speaking into the keyhole - "they say, trust in him. The Lord of Light. Look into the flames, my friend, and I will do as you say, and look into mine."

With that, the Red Priest was gone. Jon smacked the back of his head against the wood of the door and groaned. "When will I be free of this demon?" Jon questioned aloud to no one.

Jon could not return downstairs or he'd be forced to confront Thoros of Myr, so he stripped and readied himself for bed. He would need the rest if he was to compete in the melee in a few days time. Jon could not believe his misfortune. To compete in the Hand's Tourney, he would need an even more clever disguise, otherwise Lord Stark and the king would immediately recognize him. But it was useless since they would recognize his face. He'd need a helmet. Jon scowled.

Jon splashed water on his face and fell onto the bed, recalling the confrontation with Lord Stark. The way he reacted… Jon pondered over the memory and pulled out the satchel he'd hidden under his mattress. The pages from the Winter Rose Chest were still hidden there and he pulled out another wrapped bundle of the parchment. Lord Stark had acted so queer when Jon mentioned the letters.

Jon reread the note between Rhaegar Targaryen and the Knight of the Laughing Tree. The story of the Smiling Knight was told the other day in the inn by Lord Dondarrion, who had been present to witness the events of the tourney at Harrenhall (though he had been a very young lad, he admitted). Jon had listened with rapt attention and remembered the painted shield he found in the attic of the Tall Tower. Was the Knight of the Laughing Tree a knight, or a common northman? Dondarrion had said the mystery knight fought with honor and unhorsed many notable figures before disappearing the next day.

"It has happened before," Lord Dondarrion said to the group softly, "a mysterious figure from the shadows steps forth, clad in scattered pieces of armor and with a painted shield. Whatever their name, Gallowknight, Blackshield, Laughing Tree," - the Lightning Lord paused in his story to make eye contact with the silent Jon - "they always appear and disappear, without a sound."

Jon thought that last bit was theatrical and untrue besides. In all the stories Jon had ever heard, the mystery knight revealed himself at the end of the tourney, to the shock and delight of the crowd. He was uncertain whether or not the Lightning Lord was mocking him, or being sincerely encouraging. Maybe both.

Jon put that note to the side and reread the bits of parchment written in his mother's handwriting. In one, she foretold her death, and in the other, she spoke of carrying him in her womb. Jon cherished this one, and the loving words within. **There is hope in the seed that has quickened in my womb. I am filled with joy at the thought of them.** Jon smiled. **Will they have dark hair, like mine? Will they take after their father?** Another piece of the puzzle: his mother had dark hair. Darker than Lord Stark's brown? Black, perhaps. Many Dornishwomen had black hair. Jon put this parchment aside.
and looked toward the bundle.

Lyanna, a small parchment fit for a raven said, my Queen of Love and Beauty. Tonight.

A letter to his Aunt Lyanna. Jon compared the letter from Rhaegar Targaryen to Lord Stark and the short missive written to his Aunt Lyanna, side by side. The writing did not match. The raven extending an offer of peace was written with a careful, pristine script, while the letter to Lyanna had a loping hand, and the letters tilted to the left. One of these might have been written by Rhaegar Targaryen, the other might have been written by a scribe. Jon suspected the hastily written left-tilting scrawl was Rhaegar's true handwriting or perhaps they were both forgeries.

Jon put the short note aside. The rest of the page was blank anyway. Jon wondered why his father would save such an intimate correspondence. He picked up another.

For the first time in my life, I feel a fear that is unshakeable. My Silver Prince has left me, alone and with only white cloaks to keep my company. I am trapped here. Each day, the life within me grows stronger, but I am fading. News of the war has reached me, and I can do nothing but sit on the edge of that which I cannot control. I have never hated Robert more. I am not his. I married under the Heart Tree. I will never be his.

The letter was written in the sweet, loopy handwriting that Jon believed was his mother's, but the mention of the Silver Prince drew his attention. My Silver Prince has left me. Jon knew this figure could only be the dragon prince, but this fact did not make sense. The Robert she spoke of, could it be King Robert? Aunt Lyanna was betrothed to Robert Baratheon before she was stolen by the Prince, and the Silver Prince was so clearly Rhaegar Targaryen.

It was a contradiction. This letter was not written by his mother, but by his Aunt Lyanna.

Jon laid down the letter next to the others. It was a puzzle. Jon shuffled the papers and compared the journal entry by Aunt Lyanna and the entry dated 283 AC.

A sinking feeling started in his chest. The script was identical. In fact, Aunt Lyanna's handwriting dominated every other page, even the pages he once thought were written by his mother.

These pages have nothing to do with me, Jon realized, but another babe. A babe my aunt bore.

The disappointment was crushing.

Jon turned to grab another. There was one more.

I cannot bear the dreams. She is always whispering to me. Promise me, promise me. Jon recognized the handwriting of his lord father. What have I failed to do? I have taken the seed of my enemy into my house. I have done what is right and still, blood and roses haunt me at night. The Tower of Joy-

The rest of the parchment had been destroyed by water. Jon placed it with the others. Turning over the satchel, he found no more clues. The Tower of Joy… Jon could not recall that Tower from his lessons with Maester Luwin. Tomorrow, he would ask the map maker at Cobbler's Square.

A thousand thoughts surfaced and resurfaced to nag at Jon's conscience, one in particular he could not shake. Somehow, these pages were linked to Lord Stark's journal entries. Otherwise, why would Ned Stark hide them together? These ravens, letters, and scribbles were connected by the unseen strings of fate.

All this time, Jon had been buried false hope, tugged along by the fantasy that he'd finally found his mother. The Pale Snakewood wolf was likely thrown into the chest as an afterthought. It was a
child's dream. The dream of Jon the Boy, who had yet to feel the coldness of winter. The identity of his mother always eluded him. He'd entertained ideas of nobility and knighthood when in all actuality she was probably some whore from the South his father had lain with one night in a moment of weakness. The Pale Snakewood wolf was probably not even his… Robb told him it was his teether but Robb didn't know anything for certain.

Jon felt like a fool. The disillusionment shattered his heart. *I am no closer to finding my mother than before.*

With a sigh, he turned on his side.

Sleep did not come easy.

*No*, Jon thought in the dark of the night. *That is not possible. I resemble Lord Stark, everyone at Winterfell said so, there is no doubt. He would never lie to me. The honorable Ned Stark tells no lies.*

"*I am your father*, he said to me, he said it a thousand times. Never wavering or hesitating and with a conviction that could quiet Lady Catelyn and all her anger. "*You are my son," he would say to Jon. And that would be the end of all her complaints.

*There must be another,* Jon decided, turning in his sleep, *a child born of Aunt Lyanna.* Everyone knew what happened to Rhaegar Targaryen's children at the end of Robert's Rebellion, but it wasn't spoken about in polite company. Robert Baratheon would have hunted down this child and murdered them, regardless of the mother. *A babe who suffered and died, or perhaps a stillborn or a miscarriage.*

*You resemble Arya,* a taunting voice whispered, *who resembles Lyanna.*

*I have taken the seed of my enemy into my house...* Lord Stark took Aunt Lyanna's boy, or maybe he only agreed to take him... That thought spawned another, and another, and another. When he woke in the middle of the night from his nightmares, he stood shakily and splashed cool water over his face and neck. Standing over the ceramic basin, Jon stared at his reflection.

*My father's hair, my father's eyes... his nose and his jaw.* Jon remembered King Robert's bastard, Gendry, who was a copy of his father as a youth. Whoever Jon's mother was, he left little of herself in him. *I am your father, he told me, when Theon Greyjoy harassed me for being a bastard.*

Jon started to laugh out loud. *I am losing my mind.* Lying back down he turned to face the window, away from the stress and the noise and the smell of this place.

In a few days time, he'd fight in the Hand's Tourney in the melee. Jon was nervous for the battle; he had no armor prepared and the mare his father had given him did not seem battle ready. Thorsos would, no doubt, run him over early in the game just to prove a point about the Red God, or Jon's youth, or because Beric Dondarrion told him to humiliate the green boy from the Inn. Jon knew he'd have to face the Red Priest, sooner or later, but he was hoping it'd be on the field, where steel spoke instead of mouths.

Jon tossed and turned. Lord Stark would be furious to discover his treachery. "*You should not have come,*" he told Jon twice.

*What choice did I have?* Jon wondered again why he had been sent back. He wanted to prevent disaster, save his father, stop the war, bolster the Night's Watch… but these events were out of his control. Already, Bran had fallen, Lord Stark was digging deeper into the Red Keep's treachery, and Jon was no closer to uncovering the mystery of what started the war. Lord Tyrion was taken captive
despite Jon's warnings, and he was almost certain of his innocence now. Did Lord Baelish lie, or was it the assassin? Jon should have stopped it.

Instead, he was busy playing "Sand", enlisted in the melee and selfishly consumed with the identity of his mother. All these dreams, all that he had wished for while at the Wall...

*I dreamt a dream and could never dream again.*

*The Wall,* Jon buried his face in his hands. *I should have left for the Wall.*

His own words against Thoros haunted him. The Red God followed Jon everywhere, it seemed, even through time. It was true. Melisandre was powerless against the Others. The Wall did not have the strength or power to oppose the darkness. They needed dragonglass arrowheads and dragonglass swords, of which they had too few. In the back of his mind, the fate of the Night's Watch was always clawing at his conscience, eating him alive.

If Ned Stark lived… he might be able to marshal the North against the Others. Jon was hopeful for this plan, but still hesitant. Today, in the market, he had heard rumors about the Targaryen Princess in the East wed to Khal Drogo, a King among the Dothraki, although they had no true kings. At those words, Jon had stopped and thought about Sam's words. Dragonglass and dragonfire…

Stannis spoke of dragonglass. On Dragonstone. *Perhaps that is where I should go? Or maybe to this dragon queen?* Would she not birth true dragons into the world? Sam told him that once.

Eventually, he could not think about the fate of the world any longer. Jon fell into a fitful sleep. When he woke next, the sun had fallen and the room was dark. The moon was hidden behind dark storm clouds. Jon rose from the bed and lit the brazier closest to the bed.

For a few seconds, Jon looked into the flames. The fire crackled and danced, and Jon saw nothing. He'd just given up and laid down when out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow move. His eyes flickered to the edge of the fire. Again, he saw nothing.

*I have grown superstitious,* Jon realized, and returned to his bed. He did not extinguish the brazier. He could not. In the dark of the night, Jon continued to look into the flames for the shadow he saw. It had wings.

**Chapter End Notes**

A/N I was watching Parks & Recreation on Netflix the other day while doing some bills and /there's this scene in season 5(?) where the character Ben Wyatt admits he writes Star Trek fanfiction. April asks him if he's doing it right now and he mutters, "What? No... I finished it last week."

If Ben Wyatt can finish a fanfiction, so can I! (Maybe.) (I hope.) Someone should create a user account as BWyatt and write some horrible Star Trek smut. That'd be real inspiring.
A storm woke him in the night. Jon tossed and turned for hours before falling into a fitful sleep once
more. He dreamt of crumbling towers and dead men, Ygritte's red hair floating down a river of
broken ice, and Grenn's dead body reaching out for him, calling for help. Jon woke in a sweat and
scrambled out of bed, quickly pulling on his pants and light vest.

Yesterday's meeting with his father had been in a word - disastrous. Jon's actions had been premature
and rash. The egotism of a child, not a fully grown man, Jon berated himself silently while
performing his morning ablutions. He allowed his sense of righteousness to override his rationality.

"You best forget that," Lord Stark said in a deathly quiet voice, the warning clear. "You weren't
supposed to be there."

"I could never forget," Jon responded in kind, marshalling the man inside him. "Do not ask me to."

Pain welled in his heart. I saw what I wanted to see in those letter. Jon clenched his teeth. Worst of
all, he led himself astray of his true mission to prevent the war and save his father's life before it
became too late.

Seeing Lord Stark made him feel a child again, simple and unrefined, a youth not yet grown enough
to fit his own saddle or trust his own instincts. He'd acted much the same when confronted with
Thoros of Myr on the way back to his rooms. Jon wondered if being sent back to his younger body
had made him younger in mind, too. Though how that was possible, he did not know. He only knew
that he had been feeling hot-headed lately.

Probably due to this damn heat.

Jon cursed his own weakness and shook away his somber thoughts.

Where did all these doubts come from? he wondered, and called for "Ser Ghost" to follow. Opening
the door to his room at the Inn, he glanced left, then right, and then left again before leading the large
beast down the stairs and into the small courtyard. The sky was still dark and Jon thanked the moon
for its dim light.

The direwolf stalked the squirrels and a few birds, caught a crow, and did his business while Jon
leaned against the cool stone trying to quiet the mutinous thoughts in his head.

If he were to be honest with himself, the steady stream of doubt stemmed from the betrayal of his
brothers. Jon poured his lifesblood into the Night's Watch. He had denied himself the basic pleasures
of home and hearth. He had sacrificed Ygritte. He had chosen the defenses of the Wall over his own
family and had stood by as his home was burnt and his brothers were butchered. *My brothers were dying, and I remained firm. I chose to remain at my post. And when Stannis Baratheon came to offer me my heart's desire, I refused him.*

Jon looked down at his unscarred hands forlornly.

The betrayal of his brothers hurt worse than the daggers. It was a lingering pain that filled him with unease as he looked back on his years with the Watch. He wondered how long they had been plotting against him. Was it before or after Janos Slynt? In another universe, parallel to this one, what happened after he died? Did they send the wildlings north of the Wall again, to face their deaths? What would happen when Jon wasn't there to warn them of Mace Rayder's impending attack?

And Bolton. Jon's nostrils flared in anger at the thought of the Pink Letter. He would not allow that to happen. Winterfell would never be held by the Flayed Man again. *Not in this lifetime,* Jon swore to himself. *Arya will never fall victim to that bastard.*

*Should I follow in the same footsteps? Should I take the black?* Jon felt it might be inevitable. Eventually - when he was absolutely certain that Lord Stark had escaped danger and Winterfell was secured - he would return to the Wall and resume his post. But if he remained at the Wall, was he doomed to repeat the same fatal decisions and be murdered once more?

Would he lay with Ygritte again?

A strange longing began to grown in his chest and spread out to his limbs, surrounding his body. *To see her again…* Jon scoffed and shook his head. That was madness. Part of him knew that Ygritte was still alive and well, north of the Wall, but he couldn't bear to see her again. If he should lock eyes with her passionate gaze once more, it'd all come crashing down. Every wall and tower around his heart would crumble and he'd be left a weeping mess on the windy tundra.

*No, that is not an option. The pain would be too great. I cannot.*

Jon sighed and folded his arms across his chest. There was no use dwelling on a past - and future - that did not exist anymore.

Beyond that, another thought was nagging at the back of his mind concerning his leap through time. Why would the Gods send him back if he wasn't supposed to change the world's fate? And if he did make the same choices, wouldn't he be doomed into an endless loop of living - and reliving - his first life at the Wall? How would he ever break the cycle?

"Come, Ser Ghost," Jon said wearily and whistled. The direwolf's ears flattened on his large head and he remained motionless in protest. The courtyard was not nearly enough of a diversion to satisfy the predator, and Jon knew Ghost was getting bored by the day-to-day minutia of the Inn.

"One day soon," he promised the canine, "I'll take you to the Kingswood and let you loose to hunt."

Ghost seemed satisfied by that promise and trotted faithfully after his master, back to Jon's room. Jon rounded the corner to the hallway in time for Lord Dondarrion to emerge. The lightning lord looked him and direwolf once over, before nodding his head in acknowledgement and moving swiftly past. Jon heaved another great sigh and let Ghost into his prison for the day.

After the promise of a bone and another jaunt through the courtyard at night, Jon left to break his fast. The other inhabitants of the Inn were just beginning to stir as the sun's morning rays struck King's Landing. Jon picked his way through the chairs and tables to sit at his usual spot in the shadows, out of the way of the others, and called for the innkeeper's niece.
"How'll I help ya, Ser Sand?" she spouted cheerfully and winked at him. Jon had noticed her flirtatious behavior with him had increased in the last week, and he frowned disapprovingly. She still found it necessary to bend far too low when setting his dining place.

Once breakfast was ordered, Jon sat back and watched the others filter in. It was his new morning routine to eavesdrop on their conversations, trying to gather as much information on the goings-on of the capital and the upcoming Tourney. Now that Thoros had placed his name on the lists, Jon was honor-bound to compete. He would have preferred to hide in the stands and later claim that he was beaten in the first rounds, but alas, Thoros and Lord Dondarrion said they would look for him. At the very least, he had to appear.

A man in dark colors approached his hiding place and Jon cursed inwardly. Not today.

"Ser Jon," Lord Beric sat in the seat directly across from him, effectively cutting off Jon's view of the rest of the inn and asserting himself as the focal point of Jon's attention. "Lovely morning."

"Indeed," a figure in red plopped down in the adjacent seat and Jon wanted to close his eyes at the wave of dread that washed over him. The Red Priest.

"Ser Thoros," Jon steeled himself and met the priest's searching gaze, "I must apologize for my rash words yesterday. I was dreadfully tired and -"

"- and think nothing of it! Dear lad," Thoros smiled jollily and called for ale from the girl, "we all have our moments of rashness from time to time. A passionate man makes for a passionate fighter. We are all warriors here."

Jon searched Thoros' eyes but could detect nothing malicious within the other man's vacant, smiling face. The previous Lord Commander didn't believe for a second that all was forgiven, or that the priest would be forgetting their heated exchange anytime soon, but the older man was evidently extended an olive branch for the time being, and Jon was willing to play his game.

"You are very gracious, Ser."

"I have been meaning to have words with you, Ser Jon," Lord Dondarrion interjected, drawing Jon's attention, "as to how you came into possession of such a fine sword. I am an admirer of such works, you see."

The older man pointed to Jon's hip where Sweetsinger hung. Jon's hand instinctively came to rest on its hilt.

"A gift from my father," he blurted without thinking.

You need to lie better, Jon told himself. Obviously, Jon couldn't tell the truth of the sword's origins to the other two men. Everyone in King's Landing knew that King Robert had traveled to Winterfell to fetch his new Hand, but not everyone knew about the assassination attempt on the king's life. King's don't give gifts often. It would raise far too many questions and Jon would be unable to reveal the answers.

A commotion at the other end of the inn distracted Jon from the conversation. A portly fellow had dropped his coin purse, and copper, silver, and gold went scuttling across the floor. Several men jeered at the fool and pocketed his coin.

"Your father a lord? Or the blacksmith who crafted it?"

Jon's eyes widened. The boy… man, looked eerily familiar. The way his hands shook when he
reached to reclaim his coin. The waver in his voice —Jon's jaw dropped.

"Sand?" Dondarrion clapped down his mug on the table created a loud bang, but Jon couldn't care less.

That figure, that voice, the timid and unassuming posture with which he conducted himself. Sam... Jon watched his most loyal friend—now stranger—straighten and speak with the innkeeper.

Sam! Jon's heart soared for joy. Samwell Tarley had stopped at the Painted Lady on his way to the Night's Watch. Jon never knew. Forgetting Dondarrion and mumbling some sort of sorry excuse, Jon rose and moved swiftly around the other men, stopping to pick up the errant coins that Sam had dropped.

"Ah, thank you very much, Ser," Sam said politely and took the coin that Jon offered. Jon almost pulled him into an embrace, he was so damned happy to see him. *Sam, my brother Sam.*

"Samwell," Jon said, "Your name is Samwell Tarley."

"Oh, yes! Yes, it is," Sam nodded and then blinked, "Do I know you?"

"I'm Jon Sand."

"Oh," Samwell blushed and smiled. Jon remembered when they first met, how little Sam cared about his bastard name. The fat boy who readily admitted to being a coward, and only wanted someone to listen to him. "Nice to meet you! My—my name is—Well, I suppose you already know my name, uh,"—the pudgy boy blinked once slowly—, "uh, how—how do you know who I am?"

Seeing Sam brought out the honest, noble knight that residing within him, yearning to be free of the lies he'd been shackled with. He could trust Sam. Always. Sam had a good mind and a kind soul. If anyone could help him, Sam could.

"That's a..."—Jon gripped the edges of the chair in front of him and leaned forward, pitching his voice low to avoid being heard—"There's a story I need to tell you Sam, because you're the only man I can tell who'd understand. It's a rather unusual story, and I am hoping you will keep an open mind."

"Er,"—Samwell shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and looked around disconcertedly—"are you sure you have the right Sam? Haha!"

"I am."

Sam debated Jon's words for a long moment. The other boy licked his lips and looked backwards. Behind him, Jon could see two guards in Tarly colors, bartering with the innkeep for cheaper rates. Sam glanced at them and then back at Jon.

"I'm not supposed to leave their sight and I hardly know you."

Jon appraised the two guards. They were tall and muscular, and from their finery Jon supposed they were guards of the Tarly household.

"They're here to escort you to the Wall, to make sure you don't run because you're craven," Jon surmised. Sam gasped.

"H-how do you know that? I never told you that!"
"Like I said, we have a lot to talk about."

Jon waved the innkeeper's niece over. The girl came bouncing back with a soft smile on her lips. Sam watched Jon with trepidation as he ordered a flagon of wine for the Tarly guards. "From our dear friend Sam, here," Jon smiled at Sam and fished around in his purse for one of his last coins. "Make sure they don't run out."

When the girl was gone—only after a wink and a giggle—Jon turned back to his characteristically nervous friend. "I swear to you, Sam, I'm a friend. And when those two fools are deep in their cups, beg their leave and meet me in my rooms."

Jon gave him directions and left it at that. Sam was looking at him with a mixture of fear and uncertainty but Jon thought he might have enticed him enough with that bit about the Wall. He was relying of Sam's insatiable curiosity to win over his fear of the unknown. Then again, Jon sighed aloud, Sam's afraid of everything.

Jon retreated back to his table. Dondarrion and Thoros had their heads bent together, but when he returned, their whispering stopped and they turned to stare at him.

"Old friend?" Dondarrion asked.

"Aye. My apologies, my lord," Jon took a large drink of ale and sat back, stunned at his own actions. Sam might think he was mad. What hope did he have? Would Samwell Tarly believe fantasy over reason? Then again, Sam was the first to believe in the Others. He was the only brother to have researched the fables and lores of the lands beyond-the-wall. Would Sam know anything about travelling through time or being reborn?

"Didn't seem to recognize you."

"He's a nervous lad,"—Jon waved his hand—"always been easily confused. We knew each other briefly, thought it would be polite to say hello."

Jon could tell by their shared glance that they didn't believe a word he'd said, but it didn't matter much. They'd never believe the truth either.

"As we were saying, I greatly admire that steel of yours, Jon. And since the tourney is fast approaching, I thought you might like to practice in the yard together. One on one. Knight to knight. A bit of competition before the fight always loosens the muscles. We've days to go. Don't want the arms to feel rusty."

Jon almost choked on his ale. Compete against Beric Dondarrion? Never.

"I must refuse," Jon said slowly,"I'm sure you'd prefer an even competition. I doubt a bastard could ever rival the skills of a Stormlord. One of the Frey brothers-"

"The Freys are asses," Thoros snorted.

"No," Beric shook his head. "I'd prefer to suss out your strength, Ser Sand."

Jon contemplated the offer. On one hand, it would be foolish to draw more attention to himself and engage in such trivialities, but on the other hand it was equally dangerous to refuse a lord. Especially one as respected and well known as Beric Dondarrion. Jon didn't want to make an enemy out of him, particularly when he was already being watched day and night by either the Red Priest of the lord himself. He owed the lightning lord for saying nothing about the direwolf in the yard.
"I agree," Jon held out his hand and Dondarrion grinned. During the actual tournament, he would simply suffer a few blows and duck out early.

"Excellent. Blunted tourney blades. Thoros will debrief you on the rules. Sundown in the courtyard?"

Jon nodded and the two rose from the table. Thoros gave him one last mysterious look before they disappeared behind a curtain that guarded the private tables. Jon watched them go with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Jon finished his food quickly—no longer in the mood to be in public—and left for his rooms. On his way up the stairwell, he passed the Tarly group. Sam's eyes met his and he gave a tremulous smile. Jon smiled back and gave a polite nod. *If he sees I am friendly, he will be more willing to listen.*

The rest of the morning he spent in the privacy of his rooms, and he practiced swinging his sword. He left the windows open hoping for a cool breeze, but he was sorely disappointed. Eventually, he stripped down to only his southern style pants and was going through a mixture of Ser Rodrick and Ser Alliser's drills when the door knocked.

"A moment," Jon called and threw on his shirt. Ghost was at his side in an instant before he opened the door.

"Sam?"

But it wasn't Sam, it was Jory Cassel. The knight took in his panting, sweaty figure with amusement.

"Your father has summoned you. I suspect you'll need a moment to freshen yourself."

"Ser Jory." Jon bent his head. "Yes, I'll be but a few moments."

"Wear this." Jory shoved a tabard into his hands. It was checkered black and grey, and a large direwolf was stitched into the center.

"As you say."

After an awkward pause, Jon shut the door and quickly tore about his room. *Father's called for me?* Jon's heart leapt. This was his opportunity to finally change things. Jon needed to warn him of the danger, without implicating himself as having knowledge of the future, but how to accomplish such a task?

Jon finished lacing his boots and covered himself with the tabard. Jory was still waiting when he exited his rooms. "Ghost, stay." The direwolf obeyed reluctantly. Gods, he was getting bigger, Jon thought as he descended the stairs. Soon, it would be an even bigger inconvenience to keep him hidden from view. Jon had contemplated sending him back to Winterfell for the time being, but quickly abandoned that train of thought. Ghost would never consent to leaving Jon while he was still this young.

Jory led Jon to the stables and to his surprise, the horse Jon's father had gifted him had already been saddled. Jon thanked the lad who groomed the horses and together, Jon and Ser Jory set off for the Red Keep.

He hadn't been to the Street of Steel since his ill-fated conversation with Lord Stark. The city was busy, as usual, but the crowd parted to make way for men on horses, and the banner of the Hand of the King. Passing Tobho Mott's shop, Jon's eyes lingered on the smoke from the forge. The boy might be wielding a hammer, working steel, right now.
Jory announced the arrival of "the Lord Hand's guards" to the gatekeepers and the Gold Cloaks allowed them to pass under the portcullis. They dismounted at the stables and Jon followed Jory across the red stone courtyard and into the keep.

They took a less well-traveled route, at least Jon supposed it was less traveled, because they passed neither lords nor ladies, not even a guard. The labyrinthine corridors of King Robert's castle were surprisingly bare. Jon and Jory passed a large alcove where the tattered remains of a burnt tapestry hung. From what remained, he could see only a dragon's tail jutting out onto a starry sky, and he wondered if the halls were so barren because they once contained the rich history of the Targaryen dynasty brought to a cataclysmic end by King Robert.

Jon climbed, up and up, across a green courtyard and finally into the Tower of the Hand. Jory bid him wait in front of a large wooden door and Jon obeyed. This part of the castle was heavily watched by Stark and Lannister loyalists alike. Looking out the window, he had an unobstructed view of the courtyard. To the left, a band of soldiers in red and gold, and on the right, the Stark grey and silver stood facing them.

My father's movements are watched by both friend and foe, Jon thought, I wonder who will know Eddard Stark's bastard visited by the end of this day?

The door hinge creaked. "Jon," a voice called from within. Jon stepped into the large foyer and—after a strange glance from Jory—the door was shut behind him.

"Come. Sit. Have you eaten?"

Jon lowered himself into the seat across from his father. Despite the warmth of his welcome, Lord Stark's face was stony and serious.

"I am fine, thank you," Jon said, and inclined his head. "You called for me. How can I be of assistance?"

There was no point in skirting around. After their last meeting, Jon wanted to push aside any unresolved feelings and delve straight into the issue at hand. He came to King's Landing to stop the plot against Lord Stark, not to discover the truth about his mother. It was time to kill the boy once more.

Lord Stark's gaze softened, "Jon… I am sorry for our last encounter. I was shocked at what you had unveiled. A secret which I've kept for so long. A secret I kept from Catelyn, your brother's and sister's. Something I dare not speak aloud."

"It is of no consequence," Jon said firmly, "I spoke rashly. We should concern ourselves with present matters."

"I… Yes, you're right, Jon. I am glad we are able to put this matter behind us." Lord Stark's brow furrowed and his eyes grew suspicious. "I am surprised. I thought you'd press me for answers."

Jon shook his head. "It is in the past. Whoever my mother was, it does not determine who I am. I am certain of that now more than ever."

"Your- Yes," his father inhaled sharply, "of course."

"What became of the babe?" Jon asked, genuinely curious now and desperately seeking affirmation.

Lord Stark avoided his gaze, "The babe?"
"The one… Aunt Lyanna…" Jon did not need to finish the thought.

"He died," Lord Stark said quickly, cleared his throat and then added, "shortly after birth."

The knot between Jon's shoulders finally relaxed, the tension leaving, as if a great weight had been lifted. Working the muscles of his jaw, he realized he'd been clenching his teeth all today and last night.

Jon nodded. It was as he suspected.

"I am sorry for mentioning it."

Lord Stark stared at him a moment too long. A dark, deep stare that never wavered. When Jon said nothing, Lord Stark moved.

He watched as his father pulled out a large, worn tomb and dropped it on the desk with a loud thump. The book's lettering was faded on the front, but Jon could read the print on it's spine. *The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children.*

"That is a mouthful," Jon said.

"And a perilously dull read." Lord Stark sighed. He went to the window. "I have been investigating the circumstances surrounding my predecessor's last days here, in the Red Keep."

Jon nodded to show he was listening, thumbing the pages of the book.

"He visiting Mott's shop with Lord Stannis, I have been tracking his last movements."

"And he read this book?" Jon asked.

"Aye, though what he uncovered in this large monstrosity is beyond me." Jon's father returned to his desk and leafed through the pages, bringing up the lineage of the Stark family. Jon's eyes fell on the names Brandon, Eddard and Lyanna, before the page was turned once more.

"What does the book contain?"

"A history of families—the noble houses of the Seven Kingdoms, some extinct, some still surviving—the names of their sons and daughters and who they married, along with their children and their distinctive characteristics… Robb Stark," Lord Stark read aloud, "born to Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn Stark, 283 AC, blue of eye, red-brown of hair."

He passed the book over to Jon and Jon viewed the limited information written about the Stark family. "When was this book updated?" Jon asked.

"Years ago. Apparently Maester Malleon has not released an updated version for five years past. To the relief of the Citadel, no doubt."

"And the connection to the boy?" Jon asked. "From the blacksmith's shop."

"Uncertain. He is one of Robert's bastards."

"Why would he hide his bastard in plain view of the city?"

"He has nearly twenty; it is unsurprising that we might find one close to him. He frequents Littlefinger's," —the name was said with disdain—"establishments. His mother was a whore and he
greatly resembles Lord Renly, Robert's brother. It is uncanny." Then, as if remembering an important
detail, he continued, "After Jon's death, Stannis fled the city."

Jon suddenly remembered the letter the Watch received from Stannis, stating that Joffrey, Tommen,
and Myrcella were products of incest between the Queen Cersei Lannister and her brother, Jaime.
When Jon asked, Lord Mormont had dismissed the letter as rumor and convenient for a man claiming
the Iron Throne. It hadn't struck Jon as terribly important at the time, at least not until the man
appeared in the flesh. He remembered when he inherited Lord Mormont's belongings, and found the
letter in the recesses of an old box, stacked with correspondences. But the Night's Watch took no part
in the ruling of the Seven Kingdoms, and Jon had been more concerned about the lack of food, the
wildlings, the Red Woman, the Others and their impending doom. At the time, he had been more
concerned with how much Stannis would be eating, and less preoccupied with his claim to the
throne.

"So…" Jon stood to pace before his father's desk. "Before his untimely death, Jon was investigating
the status of Robert Baratheon's bastard children. Who they were, where they lived… what they
looked like."

"One could suppose."

"And whatever he discovered, about these children, threatened his life. Enough so that K— Stannis
fled the city after Jon Arryn's death."

"Lord Stannis," Lord Stark corrected. "And there is a well known animosity between Robert and
Stannis. These events may not be related."

"But the two were seen together," Jon said. "They were involved in the same plot surrounding the
king's children."

"The king's children…? You mean the princes and princess?"

"All his children," Jon said, growing excited. "There must be something in this book that we are
missing. A hidden puzzle piece."

Sam would know, Jon thought, Sam would devour this tome in a single day and begin to reiterate its
words within a week. Jon needed to find the evidence. Running a fevered hand down the spine of the
large tome, he wondered where to start.

"Father, may I take this book?" Jon asked. "To investigate further. By keeping it here, you may
incriminate yourself as guilty of the same crime for which Jon Arryn was—"

"Yes, take it." Lord Stark pushed the book across the desk. "I cannot afford to keep it here."

"My thanks. I will see it returned safely." Jon gathered the book and after weighing it, covered it
with his cloak. "Father," Jon said, and realized this was the first time that he called Lord Stark
"father" in months. "I have another matter to discuss with you, concerning Tyrion Lannister."

Lord Stark's eyes flashed.

"You have given your recommendation, already, Jon," Lord Stark said with gritted teeth. "Catelyn is
quite convinced of his guilt in the matter of Bran's attempted assassination. The King has already
commanded my wife return Tyrion to King's Landing, where he shall await trial. Robert has sent the
Kingslayer to escort them."

Lord Stark looked sour at the thought of Jaime Lannister being in the same company as his wife, but
if the King ordered it, no one could refuse.

Jon had no foreknowledge of a trial and wondered if it would even take place. For some reason, Jon did not think Ser Jaime would willingly bring his brother to the slaughter. And Tyrion's father, Lord Tywin, would not stand idly by as the Lannister name was discredited. *It is not enough*, Jon thought.

"He is too easy a target." He shook his head, "Tyrion is a dwarf, but being a dwarf is no crime. Lord Baelish is preying on Lady Catelyn's dislike for bastards and unusual things. Perhaps he knows her too well? No, I do not think Tyrion would commit Bran to the knife."

"He is the owner of the knife. And the catspaw was paid handsomely for his service." Lord Stark's voice was iron. He was displeased with Jon's defense of Tyrion. "Lannister's have access to that gold."

"Who else in King's Landing has deep pockets, who might wish to pit the Starks against the Lannisters?" Jon asked. "And knives can be stolen. Why would Tyrion travel north to the Wall and linger in the North, near the scene of his crime?"

"Pardon?" Lord Stark wrinkled his brow, genuinely confused. "Who told you this? Lord Tyrion traveled South with the King's Party."

Jon opened and closed his mouth. Lord Tyrion did not journey north and piss off the side of the Wall? Why not?

Jon had been bedridden at the time his Uncle Benjen left for the Watch. *Wait*... his mind raced. Without waiting for Jon, Benjen left some time before the King's Party. Lord Tyron remained behind with his brother and sister, offering his condolences to Lord Stark for Jon's injuries and Bran's fall. The imp had no guide for the treacherous path, he wouldn't have left alone without swords to protect him in the passes near the Mountain Clans.

"... and in the South, he crossed paths with Catelyn Stark..." Jon mumbled to himself. "Conveniently, after Lord Baelish named him the guilty party. Lord Tyrion is too intelligent for this, by far."

"How would you know his character? He is a Lannister."

"We spoke at length while I was infirm," Jon lied. "Again, I say, he is too convenient a target."

"Why are you so adamant in his defense?"

Lord Stark's nostrils flared. Jon knew he'd be thrown out of the Tower soon.

"Why are you so certain of his guilt?"

Lord Stark sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Leave me, Jon. I will think on the matter. We have time before the trial."

Jon bowed and then swiftly left, before he angered Lord Stark even further. Lady Catelyn's actions were always a point of contention between them, and he didn't wish to further come between a man and his wife, but he knew these suspicions could not be correct. Tyrion had a sarcastic shell, but a soft heart. At the Wall, he made Jon see the error of his ways and helped him cement his place among the black brothers. When he left, they shook hands as friends.

Tyrion was clever, and Bran's attempted murder was clumsy. There was too much evidence.
I have planted the seeds, Jon thought to himself and sighed, walking down the large staircase that would bring him to Ser Jory. He could only hope for Lord Stark to understand. If not, Jon might need to plan for his father's escape, and soon.

Jory led him back to the stables and they mounted together. Jon turned to his father's knight.

"I can return on my own."

"Your father's orders," Jory said, and urged his mount forward.

Jon narrowed his eyes but reluctantly followed. Was it because Lord Stark feared for his safety, or because he did not trust him to obey?

The journey back to the inn was unremarkable. They were not stopped by the guards at the gate, and the streets were not as crowded in the early evening. Soon, Jon was back at the stables of the Painted Lady, waving farewell to Ser Jory, who did not condescend to respond. Ah, the life of a bastard. Jon snorted and led his mare into her stall. How warmly Ser Jory used to greet me, when I was but a child and not a stain upon my father's honor.

The dining room of the inn was quiet, a few knights and their men milled about. Jon ordered his usual dinner fare and indulged in a second mug of ale. The Tarly men were nowhere to be seen and Dondarrion and his crew were absent as well. Thoros of Myr stood silently in front of the hearth, as per usual, gazing at his flames. He met Jon's eyes and smiled. Jon retreated to his rooms.

Ghost jumped onto him bodily.

"Ah! Ghost! Down. Down." Jon pushed his furry friend to the floor and they wrestled with one another. Jon grinned as he finally succeeded in pinning the direwolf pup to the floor. His victory was short lived, however, because Ghost was growing bigger and stronger by the day. Seconds later, he was on his back and facing the jowls of his pet.

"Well fought." Jon was panting from the exertion.

Together, they rested on the bed. Jon tossed and turned. He couldn't stop revisiting his short conversation with his father in the Hand's Tower. Had he said enough? Had he said too much? What evidence of Joffrey's incestuous birth was lying in that ponderous book? One did not idly accuse the Queen of incest.

Their short, fitful nap was disturbed by yet another a knock on the door. This one, short and demanding.

"Ser Sand!" Thoros called, "Have you forgotten our agreement?"

Jon sighed. He had not forgotten, he just preferred not to think of it and wistfully hoped they'd forgotten themselves. Rising from the bed, he promised he'd be down shortly and proceeded to wash himself quickly with the cool water in his basin. He dressed in the Dornish pants he'd bought the other day. They were light and airy, and allowed for quick movements. He almost strapped Sweet singer to his side, before he remembered they'd be using blunted tourney blades.

"I am here." Jon opened the door and was face to face with the Red Priest.

Thoros looked him up and down. "No blades? Good, we are meeting in the courtyard."

Jon followed the priest down the steps of the inn and into the large courtyard that would serve as their ring for practice. To his eternal displeasure, a small crowd had gathered to witness the event.
Jon saw the Tarly group, along with Sam, sitting on stone benches against the Wall. The Frey's and a few sellswords were loitering around the door that led to the kitchens, and on the balcony above, a lady Jon did not know was watching the scene unfold.

In the center of the yard, two swords had been thrust into the ground. They were blunted steel, and slightly rusted. Altogether unremarkable.

Beric Dondarrion stood on the other side of the yard, surrounded by men that bore the lightning bolt sigil. They were laughing at some jest, but his laughter died as Jon came into view.

"I expected a more private spar," Jon said, as his eyes swept over the spectators. Samwell briefly held his gaze, before the younger man blushed and lowered his eyes.

"When one puts a bastard in his place, might as well make the affair public."

Dondarrion grinned and then plucked one of the swords from the ground and tossed it at Jon. Jon caught the blade with one hand and tested its weight. It was slightly unbalanced, but overall, a good length and a sturdy pommel grip. Dondarrion waited for his response.

Never forget what you are, the rest of world will not. Lord Tyrion was on his mind, so it was fitting that his words came back to him then. Wear it like an armor and it can never be used to hurt you.

"Then be wary," Jon replied. "Bastards fight harder than trueborn men, they've nothing to lose and everything to gain."

Jon spun his new sword with one hand and took a fighting stance. Dondarrion barked a laugh and did the same.

"Ah, to be young again," Thoros spoke wistfully from the sidelines. "To begin, the practice shall be determined by points. A hit to the body, a sword held to the neck, or a fallen opponent all equal one. No blades, other than the one you've been given and no strikes to the head."

"Oh, aye, we all know." Dondarrion sighed. "Get on with it."

"Eager to meet the ground?" Jon smiled. The weight of steel in his hand was making him confident.

"Eager to drink to my victory after this farce of a match."

"I shall, myself, award the points and ah... um... you, boy?" Thoros pointed to Samwell Tarly, who'd risen to leave.

"M-me?"

"Yes, I may be biased as a dear friend to our Stormlord. And you are a friend of Ser Jon. Together, we shall even the odds."

"B-but I know nothing about-"

"We will play to three. READY! BEGIN!"

Samwell's protests fell on deaf ears as Dondarrion and Jon both began to circle one another. Jon observed the practiced footwork of his opponent. The Stormlord held himself confidently, his movements smooth and steady. Jon was reminded of his matches against Robb, months ago, in the courtyard of Winterfell. The snow had been falling and it crunched beneath their feet. Jon had learned to fight smoothly on snow and ice, but Robb still suffered from slippery footing and Jon won
the match easily. Here, there was no snow.

A twitch of Dondarrion's left arm was his only indication of an upcoming strike. Jon parried and deflected the blow, then spun on his feet to disengage. Dondarrion might be the stronger man, but Jon was quick and he did not want the Stormlord to fall into a rhythm of strikes, where Jon might be overpowered.

"Your footwork is good, your arms are strong. Where did you learn to fight boy?"

Jon knew the question was meant to be a distraction. Ser Alliser employed the same tactic while he taught.

"I had a mixture of teachers," Jon replied vaguely.

"But one of them was a knight," Dondarrion replied.

"Aye, two of them were knights." Jon was watching the other man's body for some tell as to his plans. "And the last was a wildling."

The second time Dondarrion lunged, Jon parried once more and rolled away and onto his feet, striking out at Dondarrion's back.

"Point!" Thoros shouted, the Tarly men groaned.

"The wildling taught me that." Jon grinned.

"Unorthodox." Dondarrion recovered quickly and struck again. He brought down his sword heavy over Jon's head and Jon barely brought up his sword in time to meet him. They traded blows, neither met their mark, but Dondarrion's blows had the greater force. Jon had fought opponents like this before at the Battle for the wall. But solo combat was different from a battle. He had nowhere to run and no assistance from arrows.

"P-point!" Samwell said, when Dondarrion landed a blow to Jon's ribs. Jon staggered backwards and Dondarrion landed a second blow on his retreating legs.

"Point!" shouted Thoros. "Two to Lord Dondarrion and one to Jon!"

Jon rolled out of the way of Dondarrion's third strike and once again landed a blow on his unsuspecting back.

"Point! Evenly matched once more," Thoros shouted. Dondarrion's men began to encourage him to end the match and Jon knew the competition would be over soon. Whoever scored the next point would be proclaimed the victor. Jon retreated to reassess, and they wound up circling each other once more. Dondarrion right leg was sporting a limp, and Jon could feel a large bruise blooming on his shoulder where he suffered the brunt of Dondarrion's second blow.

"Come closer, Ser Sand, let us test our mettle against one another. Unless you're craven?"

The Dondarrion men laughed at their lord's jest. Jon almost laughed himself. No one had called him craven since he'd returned from beyond the wall. The idea was outrageous.

It struck Jon then that he might have to be outrageous to win this fight against Dondarrion. If he lost, he might suffer from a wounded pride, but even worse, the Stormlord would continue to hound him.

Jon lunged quickly, but the move was a feint. Dondarrion's arm swung, but it met only open air. Jon
switched sword hands just as Dondarrion's sword came down to meet him a second time, with a shout from it's master. Jon flattened his body to avoid the blow and brought his left hand holding the sword up to meet Dondarrion's neck. He tapped the lord's chin.

"P-point!" Samwill cried cheerfully and clapped.

"You do fight like a wild man," Dondarrion murmured, only loud enough for Jon to hear. "Like a wild wolf. Jon Snow."

Jon lowered his sword. The Tarly and the Dondarrion men were all grumbling and groaning, and paying other spectators who'd bet on the outcome. Jon noticed Sam pocketing a handful of gold. Up on the balcony, the lone lady clapped her hands and fanned her face.

Thoros was scratching his beard and surveying the scene with crossed arms. "An interesting fight, with two different, distinct styles. I think I shall look forward to our blades meeting one another in the melee, Ser Jon." Thoros' smile grew wider. "In fact, I think I shall seek you out."

Jon was unsettled by these words. He did not want the Red Priest to seek him out. Quite the opposite, he wanted Thoros to forget he ever existed.

"Thank you for the practice,"—he bowed to Beric Dondarrion—"my lord. By your leave."

Dondarrion hesitated and then waved him off. "I am rusty, that is why I lost," Jon heard him say as he walked away. "I shall not lose again."

Jon returned the blunted blade to Thoros, who took it quietly with an intense stare, and then quickly walked toward the stairwell. He did not want to linger any longer in the company of these lords and great men. Halfway to the door, Jon was accosted by Samwell.

"W-well fought, Jon. I dare say, you even made me envious of your skill. And I've never had an interest in swordplay my entire life."

"You'd be interested if it would save your life," Jon quipped and then immediately wished he could take the words back, as Sam's face fell.

"Y-yes, I suppose I would be. But I'm awful at it, and I'm a coward too."

"No, you're not, Sam. I apologize, I'm just tired from today." Jon glanced back cautiously towards where Dondarrion and Thoros were deep in discussion.

"Too tired?" Sam asked. "I bet on you. The men were all saying how you'd lose, so I took their bet. Not like my gold will do me much good on the wall." Sam giggled uncomfortably. The round-faced boy looked uncomfortable at the mention of his final destination. "I didn't bet much, so I gave my winnings back to my father's men. They're already drunk on what you gave them earlier. I think they're almost set for sleep. I've a moment to speak."

Jon's eyes widened. He turned to look back at the courtyard. The Tarly men had all stumbled back into the inn and Sam was truly left alone.

"Alright then." Jon nodded. "Follow me."
A/N Hey to those people who read my A/Ns! (lol, like anybody reads author's notes). I have just started a 2 year program at a new college and it is an intense program. I had a lot of fun fine tuning the first couple of chapters and posting (sometimes twice) every week, but that's going to slow down. I'm going to try to post once a week or every two weeks, and I still plan to continue the story. Thanks for your understanding!

Q: What's your favorite quote? Mine is anything Dolorous Edd says.

Also, sorry this update is late. This chapter is relatively long, so hopefully that makes up for it.
Jon exhaled shakily.

"... and that's the whole story. Go ahead, say I'm a mad man. Say I've lost my mind, and you were crazy to ever talk with me."

Sam was sitting across from him, his chubby face illuminated by the candlelight. Jon felt like he'd been talking for hours. He probably had been talking for hours. He told Sam everything. The original journey to the Wall, joining the Night's Watch, the Fist of the First Men, the War of Five Kings, the Battle for the Wall, Stannis, becoming Lord Commander, letting the Free Folk into the Gift and finally, how the Watch had betrayed him. Jon even told him about Ygritte, and his voice wavered pitifully as he relived her death. He told Sam he still didn't know if it was his arrow that had done it, something he could barely admit to himself on a good day.

"Well," Sam said and bit his lip. "That's quite a story."

Jon sighed and leaned back in his chair. The night was warm—as it always was in King's Landing—and he was sweaty and impatient.

"You don't believe me."

"Now... n-no. I didn't say that, it's just... it's all rather difficult to believe. You d-died and then came back... only younger. Are you sure it wasn't a dream?"

"Dreams don't last three years. I slept in this dream. I ate in this dream. I fucked in this dream and I died in this dream." Jon pinched his nose. "You were my best friend, Sam. I can tell you things you told me, things only you and I would know."

"L-like what?"

"How your father sentenced you to the Wall. He was ashamed of you. You liked books and poetry and singing more than the sword, and there's nothing wrong with that. Nothing 'tall." Jon raised his hands at Sam's affronted look. "But he took you into the woods for a hunt, anyway. Your father gave you a choice. The wall... or death."

Sam's face darkened and he closed his eyes. For a moment, Jon thought he might have pushed too far.

"I didn't even tell my mother that," Sam whispered. "Just said I was leaving, and not to cry."

The two brothers sat in silence, Jon, hoping beyond hope that Sam was swayed, and Sam, no doubt
in remembrance of the life he left behind.

"You told me you were a craven at the Wall, Sam. But you're one of the bravest men I know. I…" Jon cringed. "I need your help. I need help preventing the wars to come. Saving my family from death."

Sam nodded but remained silent and Jon let him be. Sensing the other boy's distress, Ghost padded over to the table and licked Sam's hands. The Tarly boy giggled at the sensation and patted the direwolf's furry ears.

"He's friendly," Sam remarked.

Jon sensed his desire to break from the subject and nodded.

"He knows you're no threat. Here, Ghost." Jon patted his knee and Ghost placed his head faithfully in Jon's lap. "But make no mistake, he won't be like this for much longer. Once he's grown he'll be deadly."

"I c-can imagine so." Sam's eyes swept over the length of the direwolf in awe. "I've always wanted a pet. F-father never let me have one. Said I cooed over puppies and kittens too much."

"You can come see Ghost anytime," Jon promised.

"Ah, aye." Sam stood and bowed awkwardly. "I thank you. You've—um… given me much to think on. I p-promise I'll consider all that you have said at the Wall."

"You won't stay." Jon couldn't stop the disappointment from creeping into his voice.

"Well, I can't," Sam said matter-of-factly, "I made a promise and there are men here to escort me. Even if I wanted to… I cannot disobey my f-father."

"You could write a writ, renouncing your claim to your father's lands," Jon suggested, but he knew it was a weak solution. Unless Sam took a vow to the Night's Watch, or the Citadel, or the Faith, he still stood as a contender to Dickon Tarly, the second Tarly son.

Sam gave him a look and Jon pursed his mouth.

"Very well," Jon said, "It was simply a relief to speak freely with a friend. I thank you, Sam. You've done me good. Please remember what I said about the dragonglass and the dragonsteel."

Sam bobbed his head. "I-I will not f-forget your words, Jon Snow, as outlandish as your tale was. I a-am a man of my word."

"That's all I can ask." Jon showed him to the door, and with one last fond pat on Ghost's head, and a watery smile, Sam was gone. Jon shut the door behind him and sighed, leaning against the wooden frame.

"I hope that wasn't a mistake," Jon told Ghost, "because I've made enough mistakes for one lifetime. Two lifetimes."

Ghost licked his face and Jon was glad, because then he'd never have to admit to himself that he was crying tears of shame and loneliness and stress. Sam was leaving and Jon was alone again. Fighting a war that couldn't be won.

The next several days were uneventful. Jon renewed his friendship with Samwell Tarly, which
admittedly wasn't very difficult because Sam had longed for a friend even more fervently than Jon had longed to be a Stark.

Friendship with Sam was easy, Jon reflected, like slipping on an old glove. Only this time, Jon made more of an effort not to act like an ass. Sam told him about his fears at the Wall, and Jon told him about his father. Sam described Horn Hill, and Jon described Winterfell. Jon learned things he never knew about Sam's mother and sisters, and Jon returned the favor. He even told Sam about his fruitless search for his lost mother and the secret pain it brought him.

Thankfully, Sam never pressed for more information. Jon left out many important details about his reasons for being in the Capital because it would only hurt Sam to know. Sam didn't seem to begrudge him for falling silent at times.

And—after some internal debate—Jon told him about the Queen's children, and his suspicions. At first, Sam was hesitant. Jon couldn't blame him for having reservations, especially after Sam managed to wheedle out Jon Arryn's murder surprisingly fast. Eventually, the puzzle was too tempting for the son of Tarly, and they were putting together the pieces in his room by the fire.

Sam swore never to tell a soul about all they discussed, but Jon didn't need any reassurances.

"We were brothers once," Jon told him, "and I should have been a better brother."

They broke their fast over the book of houses. Enlisting Sam's help to search the book for clues was one of Jon's better decisions. No one can read a book like Samwell Tarly. Before long, Sam found the answer in the Baratheon pages and Jon earmarked the page for future reference. Unfortunately, he had no way of contacting Lord Stark. He would have to wait for a summons.

The day of the tournament dawned bright. Jon was awake before the sun rose, as per usual, to allow Ghost his time in the open courtyard. By the time they returned to Jon's room, his belly was swarming with nervous butterflies.

Yesterday evening, Dondarrion had invited him to travel with his group toward the tourney ground. The tents had been erected for the past week, and judging by the sheer number of sigils he'd seen on the ground, the competition would be quite large. Jon had still planned a hasty defeat, but now he knew he'd have to last long enough for Thoros to beat him in the melee.

"I'll be coming for you, Ser Sand." Thoros had grinned heartily at him over his dinner. The hall was almost devoid of life and only Jon, Sam, Thoros, and Dondarrion sat in a circle of chairs by the fire. "I have seen it in my flames. We lock blades, and dance the dance of fire and steel."

"I can hardly wait to see. I must steal away from the tilts to bear witness," Dondarrion had said and extinguished his pipe. "Join me in my tents tomorrow, Ser Jon, and I will see you outfitted properly. We cannot allow this Red God heretic to best the Westerosi."

"No, indeed," Jon had agreed.

"But I have seen it in the flames! My lord." Thoros could be heard complaining, after he had followed Dondarrion to the upper quarters. "For the first time in nearly a decade! The Lord of Light has given me a vision."

After they were gone, Sam had turned to Jon.

"I've convinced Ser Randy to stay." Sam had pointed at one of the larger Tarly guards, who was drunk in the corner and entertaining a lady of the night. "At least until the tournament is over. I didn't need to do much to convince him."
"I'm glad," Jon had said, "I'll need someone to cheer for me."

That was yesterday. Today, Jon felt even less confident. He dressed once more in the loose, flexible clothing he'd purchased and split his coin purse. Half his money he'd leave in his room at the inn, and half he'd take to the tourney grounds for food and to barter for armor if Dondarrion's generosity did not pan out. He'd at least need a helmet to hide his face from the Stark household if they happened to witness the melee. Leaving his room, he grabbed the leather arm bracers that Lord Stark had commissioned for his sake.

At the foot of the stairs he saw Sam.

"I've never been to a tourney!" Sam cried for all to hear. "I hope you win Jon, then I can say I knew a tourney winner."

"Ser Sand won't be winning this competition." Thoros appeared from behind him and Jon nearly jumped out of his skin. "I will be."

"But I know you too." Sam smiled.

"So you do." Thoros nodded.

The Tarly and Dondarrion parties joined with Jon and Thoros, and they left the inn in splendor. Jon rode the mare his father had lent to him. The streets were lined with smallfolk that cheered the Stormlord's name—and Thoros—as they passed. Jon was struck by the sheer enormity of the celebration to come. Not a single child's hands seemed to be without a small flag. The sigils of each major and minor house soared through the wind on different colored kites. Jon even saw a grey direwolf in the sky.

Their procession was met by many others and they joined the steady stream of people funnelling out of the King's gate. Jon and Sam rode side-by-side with Sam pointing out the different sigils for Jon to see.

"And there, that's the sigil of House Redwyne. A blue banner with a cluster of grapes at it's center. They have the sweetest wines. And that! The sigil of House Royce - oh, if only I knew what the runes meant!"

Jon had to smile at Sam's enthusiasm. In the distance, he could see the King's tent and the royal stands being erected for the nobility. Somewhere in that crowd, Lord Stark and his daughters were being hosted. Jon felt a pang of loneliness and resolutely faced forward. *I will not envy them*, he told himself.

They reached a small row of black colored tents with painted white stairs, banners of purple lightning flapped in the breeze on long poles flanking the walkways, and Jon knew they'd found Dondarrion's plot. The Stormlord dismounted and rushed under the largest canopy quickly. Jon lingered outside, searching on his mount for an armor or weapons dealer who might lend him a helmet for a small fee. He was forced to dismount when a young squire took the reins of his mare forcibly.

Jon leapt to the ground. His horse was tied to a nearby post alongside Thoros'. Once on his feet, Samwell bid him good luck and left with his father's men to find a good seat to view the melee.

"Come on, lad." Thoros' hand fell on his shoulder. "Let's find you some armor."

Thoros led Jon into a large tent.

"My lord... I did not expect-"
"I'm not a lord, Jon Sand. I am a humble follower of the true lord, though, and in my flames, I saw you with armor. I cannot fail my God, Jon."

Jon could not think of a suitable objection. Thoros wielded his religion as well as he wielded his sword. Dondarrion's tents were large and spacious. The lord himself was being outfitted in one corner, and several other knights from the Stormland's were busy sharpening steel or flexing leather. The knights and their squires all looked up at Jon's entrance.

"Ah, Ser Jon. Thoros. Welcome." Dondarrion nodded and that seemed to settle the matter. The men gave Jon a suspicious look, but after their lord's easy greeting, they were content to ignore the newcomer and the red priest.

Thoros and Jon rifled through some spare parts and eventually, Jon chose some worn leather that suited him just fine. They were lucky enough to find a complete set of chainmail to accompany it and a matching pair of steel bracers for his thighs and calf-guards. Thoros was chatting the entire time about flames and Gods and luck and other nonsense.

Jon tried to ignore him, but it was difficult. He was painfully reminded of Melisandre's many warnings about daggers. She had tried to tell him so many times, but Jon refused to listen. He could not see past his detestation.

Her prophecy about the girl in grey had come true, as well as her prophecy about the daggers. If Thoros had taken Melisandre's place at the Wall, would Jon have put more stock in predictions?

No, he thought, that was before the daggers and the betrayal. Jon needed that failure as a lesson.

"An old practice set," Dondarrion commented when Jon was finished. "It suits you. You may keep the leathers."

"My lord, you are very generous."

"No, think of it as an investment. When this is over, I want to take you and Thoros back to my lands. I could use a sword like yours, Ser Jon. Perhaps I shall make you a knight in true. In fact, I think I shall."

Jon could not believe his ears. A noble lord, offering poor, bastard-born Jon Snow a knighthood. It was one of his childhood dreams, an adolescent fantasy he once clung to in the dark recesses of the night, like his dream of being called Jon Stark. Only in this instance he would choose a new name such as Ghostwolf, or Whitestark.

"Perhaps…" Jon reiterated, "someday."

Dondarrion laughed. "If I command you, Jon Sand, you shall obey."

Thoros tightened the last buckle on the leather chestpiece. Jon tested his movements. It was good brown leather, not black, like the outfits he'd grown accustomed to. It felt wrong to forsake the color of the Crows, but he had no choice. Mercifully, Thoros fitted him with a strong visor to obscure his face.

Jon helped Thoros strap on a much more complete suit of armor. He almost dropped the shield Thoros had chosen when he saw the fiery heart of the Lord of Light emblazoned on its center.

"I have a second." Thoros pointed to a round, leather and steel shield propped innocuously against a wooden table. "It would please me to see you bear the Lord's sigil, Jon."
Jon's eyes flitted between Thoros and the shield. Melisandre's words echoed ominously in his ears, *There is only one God, Jon Snow.* While it sickened him to carry the sigil of the Lord of Light, he might owe his second awakening to the merciless God of Fire.

Jon hefted the shield onto his back. It clanged against the hilt of his sword. The noise jolted him out of his dark thoughts. *It is a shield, and nothing more.*

"It is a good weight," Jon managed to say after testing its fit. In truth, it was lighter than he expected.

Thoros led him to where the horses were tethered and they mounted together. They followed a rough dirt path lined with tents toward the fenced off arena that would serve as today's competition grounds. Commonfolk recognized the man in red, the champion of pyke, and Jon heard calls of "Thoros! Thoros of Myr!" and "Dondarrion!" from the sidelines.

Jon kept his head bowed. He did not want to attract undue attention.

"Here, I shall leave you," Thoros said as he turned his white filly.

Jon was placed between two unknown knights. *Just as well,* he thought and checked the visor of his helm.

A man in a gold doublet made his way from the stands into the central grounds. Jon's eyes were drawn to the lords and ladies in the background. The grey direwolf of Stark hung next to the King's stag. The large, built figure of his father was flanked by two slighter frames, one with distinct red hair and the other with a rat's nest of black locks. Father, Arya and Sansa.

"The rules of the melee are as follows," the richly dressed man announced. "Should the competitor fall from their mount or be knocked unconscious, they shall be stricken from the lists. None shall be mortally wounded. In the name of King Robert Baratheon-

"Oh, get on with it!" Jon distantly heard the King shout and the crowd roared in approval.

"LET THE MELEE BEGIN!"

On the other side of the field, Jon saw Thoros charge forward. His sword ablaze. The other competitors shrank from him. Soon, Jon was embroiled in the chaotic mess of the melee, surrounded by mud and horse and steel.

Jon swung hard and locked blades with the man to his left. They sparred back and forth. The man's swings were strong, but Jon blocked them with the shield of the Lord of Light. Jon retaliated with a few hammering blows and eventually knocked the man off his horse. A few people cheered—commoners in the crowd closest to him—and Jon recognized the man he'd ousted from the inn.

Jon's attention was drawn by a shout. A warrior in blue charged. Jon managed to lift his shield before the might of his opponent war hammer broke across his back. The blow shocked his arms, but at the last second, he remembered his sword. Sweetsinger rang with purpose as he dispatched the man who challenged him with a flat blow to the back of his helmet.

Now, the numbers had dwindled to half, possibly twenty by Jon's count. The weaklings and the half-drunk had been weeded out. Across the field, Jon heard Thoros shouting chants about the darkness. He wielded fire like a man possessed. *Possessed by his religious fervor.* Another three men fell to the ground in small skirmishes while Jon skirted the edge of the competition, and then there were five and ten.

*If he will not attack me, I will have to charge him myself.* Jon stretched his arms and planned his
approach. Five contestants blocked the route between himself and the red priest. He would need to be quick.

Jon locked blades with a man whose sigil he did not recognize. He was an older man and much more experienced, Jon could tell from his practiced swings. Jon was losing the fight and his arms began to tire. But then he noticed a blindness in his opponent's left eye. Jon landed more blows against the man's weaker side and eventually succeeded in knocking the man back.

Now, he was getting impatient. The numbers were dwindling and he needed to fall soon. **What game is Thoros playing?** Jon wanted to confront Thoros. If he did not, the man might hound him from now until the end of his days. Thoros had been relentless in his harassment. If it didn't end now, it never would.

The Hound was next to batter against Jon. A much larger man with a monstrously strong arm. Jon urged his mount backwards, desperate to retreat. His only choice was to dodge and evade. When Thoros rode past in a blaze of wildfire and the Hound flinched, Jon suddenly got his inspiration.

He backed his horse further, towards Thoros' fire. Jon placed Thoros' horse between himself and his larger opponent, and the Hound's own stallion reeled backwards when Thoros' blade got too close. The Hound shouted when he fell from his mount and the crowd screamed in delight.

Fire was coursing through his veins. Jon was exhilarated. He had forgotten the rush of a good fight. Beneath his visor, he grinned.

And then there were ten. Thoros was circling around, saving Jon to be one of his last opponents. Jon cursed him to hell and back but refused to charge, hoping instead to catch his breath for a moment because he was winded. Eventually, one of the knights came for him, but the knight was already bleeding from a head wound, and Jon outright kicked him off his mount. **No one ever said you couldn't use your feet.**

Finally, finally, Thoros turned his blazing sword on Jon.

If Jon had taken a moment to reflect, he would have realized how Sweetsinger's music had enchanted him. There was nothing left in the world except R'hillor's red servant, and Jon's burning desire to prove himself of the Lord of Light's followers. The crowd began to jeer at the standstill so Thoros surged forward with a shout.

"Come on, bastard."

Jon's vision went red. Their blades met in a clash of music and fire. Thoros was wide-eyed and grinning. A moment passed where they locked blades and shared a secret communiqué. This was competition, and nothing more. Jon blocked and parried and swung. The fire danced before his eyes. The blaze spread to his right arm, but he felt nothing except the rush of battle.

Thoros was backpedaling, so Jon urged his horse forward. Jon needed to win, now. This was about more than the stupid tourney. He was no longer in King's Landing, but experiencing the bitter, cold North, surrounded by the wights at Hardhome.

He made a powerful thrust against the priest's breastplate. Thoros grunted and grabbed at his side. Jon pushed forward and his mare obeyed. Thoros was reeling now. The fire should have served to deter Jon, but it only made him more eager to prove that he was not afraid. He was not afraid of the Red God or his slaves. Jon was a free man.

Thoros fell.
Jon's arm was raised, his sword ready to strike again when he was knocked forwards and out of the saddle by a blow to the back. Stars danced around the corner of his vision as he tumbled to the ground. Pain radiated from his shoulder where he struck the ground and Jon narrowly avoided his mare's hooves by rolling through the mud.

Cheers and the roar of flame greeted him when he stood. With a dumbfounded look, he stamped out the fire on his arm. It tickled pleasantly. Thoros was laughing uproariously to his right. Covered in mud, the only thing human about the Red Priest was the white of his teeth and eyes.

"Oh, God of mine, how you have humbled your servant," Thoros said aloud. "I am ever faithful."

Jon blinked and stared down at his burnt hands. Only they weren't burnt, just speckled with mud and dirt. The horn sounded again and Jon distantly heard Thoros calling his name. Realizing the task was futile, the Red Priest took hold of Jon's mare's reins and led him towards the tents. Jon leapt onto the back of the horse with difficulty, feeling dizzy from his fall. The crowd was calling for him, people were asking him his name, but Jon was mute. Knights picked up their fallen swords, and they stopped to watch Jon ride by, bowing their heads.

*That did not go as planned*, Jon thought blithely. *At least I am not the champion and my helm is still on my head.* Turning around, Jon realized that the man who had kicked him to the ground had just captured the title. Ser Patrek of House Mallister.

Strange hands grabbed him and hoisted him down from the mare. The horse skittered away nervously and suddenly, he was on the ground and being dragged forward. Jon recognized Dondarrion's tents.

"Here, yes. Put him here. Cut the fabric," Lord Dondarrion said and left after giving his orders to his Maester. Jon was seated on a large setee and soon, his leather bracers were undone and peeled away from his skin. A knife sliced clean through the arms of his shirt to reveal pink flesh.

"Ah… How can this be?" Thoros rotated Jon's arm.

Jon looked down at his arm. It was unburnt. Jon had seen the flames and felt the heat, but he had not been burned. There was no explanation. *There was none, there was none, there was none,* he chanted internally.

"Your arm was on fire. I saw it. I bloody fucking saw it," Thoros breathed. "That's not possible."

"The armor protected me," Jon said. In truth, he was baffled. "It's only a cut."

"Not from that," Thoros replied. "You should be burnt. I saw it. Your skin should be melted. Melted, I say."

Thoros was looking at him in awe. Jon was staring resolutely ahead. A thousand thoughts ran through his head and none of them pleasant. The last time he'd been injured, the wounds had smoked and appeared cauterized. It was an unusual injury that confused Maester Luwin. The Maester had even written to the Citadel about it, but Jon never inquired whether or not he'd received a reply.

"Blood magic," Thoros was muttering. "I put blood on the sword. The fire is not natural… unnatural fire… unnatural blood? Fire and flesh and blood…?" Thoros trailed off, muttering in Valyrian.

Was this a side effect of his leap through time? The stab wounds on his back were dark and raised. He could not recall a time when he'd been burnt afterwards.

"Quickly," Thoros whispered, "We must cover it in bandages. They cannot know." Thoros
smoothed a salve over his unburnt skin and covered it with cloth. It was completely unnecessary, but the red priest did it anyway.

"You were not burnt." Thoros looked close to tears. "I knew there was a reason. I saw you in the flames. I saw it."

Jon had no response. Thoros finished wrapping his arm and then tugged him upwards.

"You must go and receive your reward. Third place is a bloody good position," Thoros said quickly, "I suspect your father will not forgive you for this, Jon Snow."

Jon was not surprised that Thoros and Dondarrion were in each other's confidence. It unsettled him that they both knew his true identity. And yet, they had not revealed it to any of the others.

"No," Jon replied and turned over his arm. "I suspect he will not."
Jon was floating. He inhaled another puff from the long pipe he'd been given by some lord's son whose name he no longer recalled. Thoros' face twisted and blurred. It was hot in the inn. Ghost's fur was pressed against his side. Together, they lay on the woven rug in front of his fire, staring into the flames, waxing philosophical on the will of the gods and the fate of mankind.

Jon was high on victory.

Once the tournament was over the victors were clear, and the festival lasted long into the night. Jon came in third in the melee and received a small monetary prize for his efforts. None could have predicted that an unknown bastard from the North would best the famed Thoros of Myr, and Jon Sand received some small degree of fame for that fact alone. Another unknown, Anguy the Archer, won the Archery competition and was already handing out his winnings freely to the people (and the whores) of Flea Bottom. Also surprisingly, Sandor Clegane won the joust and had crowned Jon's half-sister, Sansa, as the Queen of Love and Beauty.

Sansa loved every moment in the sun, and when she passed Jon on her flowered horse, she deemed him worthy enough of a fleeting kiss on the cheek. Jon could count on one hand the number of times Sansa had kissed him. All the love from her had stopped after she learned what the word "bastard" meant.

After that brief exchange, Jon avoided the dances and the feast as best he could. Lord Stark was in the King's pavilion, and Jon knew better than to seek out his lord father. There were far more exotic parties occurring on the streets—and in the taverns—anyway.

Luck was not on Jon's side, however, and he was spotted with Samwell when he went to collect his prize from the King's steward.

"Jon!" Arya shouted with glee. "Father! Jon! It's Jon!"

Arya's small frame ducked and weaved around the crowd of the King's tent, and she came to a stumbling halt before him. His little sister danced back-and-forth on her feet with excitement. Jon put a finger up to his lips and shushed her, but it hardly did any good. "Jon, Jon, Jon!" She skipped and hugged him round the waist. Ser Jory followed her at a distance with an amused smile, and then came Lord Stark.
His father looked him up and down on his approach. "Why are you covered in mud?" Lord Stark frowned disapprovingly. Arya didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

There was no avoiding it, his father would find out sooner or later. "I was in the melee." Jon looked Lord Stark in the eye.

"You—what?!" Lord Stark grabbed him under the armpit and dragged him away from the others. Arya followed, despite Ser Jory's attempts to make her stand still. Over his shoulder, Jon could see Samwell looking lost, holding Jon's prize purse. Jon shouted for him to wait.

Lord Stark pulled him into a small clearing between tents. They were still surrounded by revelers on all sides, but no place would be truly private.


"Thoros and Lord Beric enlisted me when they could not find my name on the lists—"

"They know who you are?" Lord Stark interrupted to ask. His eyes shifting left and right nervously, as if to search out the men in question, but the crowd was thick this close to the pavilion.

"Yes and no." Jon shook his head. "I think they were playing with me—mocking me—or initiating me. Lord Dondarrion offered me a knighthood. I believe the offer was genuine."

"You turned him down." It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact.

"Aye," Jon said and nodded. "But he is persistent."

"Did you win?" Arya asked excitedly. "Oh, don't be angry with him, Father. Jon's a good fighter, even better than Robb."

Lord Stark looked down at his youngest daughter with mild exasperation. "The melee is not a game, Arya."

Arya looked at him expectantly, and so Jon spoke. "I defeated Thoros of Myr's flaming sword," Jon told her. "And I came in third."

Lord Stark nodded his head and sighed—in relief?—Jon was not certain. "Third place contestants are not recorded. How did you defeat Ser Thoros?"

Jon thought about the flaming sword. The bandages and the salve on his arm itched over his unburnt skin. He was tempted to rip it off and show his father.

"Luck," he finally said, his tongue dry.

Lord Stark nodded and looked wistfully in the direction of the sun, his mind far away. "Sometimes it comes down to luck." Lord Stark looked down at his bastard and it seemed like he had something more to say, but he was interrupted by the king's loud call.

Jon's father released his arm. "We will talk about this," he promised. Jon did not doubt him.

Arya remained behind to speak at length to Jon about water dancing. Jon learned all about her new teacher, Syrio Forel, and he introduced her to Samwell when his shy friend finally came wandering over, but his mind continued to drift toward the inevitable confrontation with Lord Stark.

"Was that your father?" Sam asked when they left Arya and headed back to the inn.
Jon nodded, distracted.

"He didn't seem too happy."

Jon gave him a look. "No, he wasn't."

"I'm sorry," Sam said genuinely. "I know all about unhappy f-fathers if you want to t-talk about it."

Jon didn't want to talk about it, but he appreciated the offer all the same.

At the gates, Martyn Rivers stopped and embraced him drunkenly, shouting "a bastard had won third in the melee" for all to hear, and one of the whores on the Muddy Way wreathed him in flowers. Jon ignored him, and the whore, but he had to smile.

Upon returning to the inn Jon and the other knights were rewarded with endless ale and the undying adoration of the Painted Lady. The knights both applauded and mocked one another in turn, making jibes and boasting bruises. Ser Patrek, the champion of the melee, was curious as to how Jon Snow bested Thoros of Myr, and so the Mallister lord took him aside bodily to question him at length about his prowess with the sword, insisting on a mock fight to "even the score" at a later date. Jon was vague with his answers, and fortunately, Ser Patrek was more interested in talking about himself.

Dondarrion also pulled him away sometime during the night and insisted Jon ride to Blackhaven immediately after the tournament, "For we have a need for strong men in the Stormlands." Jon managed to delay his answer with some help from Sam, and the Lightning Lord went to bed disappointed and deterred.

Hours later, Jon begged his excuses, intoxicated from the ale Ser Patrek had challenged him to drink. He stumbled up the stairs, his arms and legs sore and his muscles exhausted, absentmindedly carrying the pipe the Frey sons had lent to him. Thoros trailed after Jon.

"I lied to you," Jon said over his shoulder. "I did see something in the fire."

"What was it?"

"Let me show you."

And so now, Jon and Thoros sat in companionable silence, smoking the leftover Frey leaf and watching the flickering flames. Ghost was sprawled on the carpet, resting his weight against Jon's body. The shadows danced.

"There!" Jon pointed. "That."

"Describe it."

"A wing, a great, leathery, veined wing. I cannot tell the color."

"A bird, or a bat perhaps?" Thoros furrowed his brow.

"I think it is a dragon."

Jon did not mention his knowledge of the future or Danaerys Stormborn and her three baby dragons in Essos. Over the past month or so, Jon thought often of the Wall, and how a living, breathing, creature of fire might be used to combat the Others. It was a fool's hope. A dream. But might it be Westeros' only chance against such a powerful evil?
"A dragon." Thoros nodded slowly. "Yes… yes. Dragons are creatures of fire and chaos. A sign of the times to come."

"What does it mean for us?" Jon laid back on the rug. Drinking made him talkative. "Targaryens?"

"Hum, I cannot say, Jon Snow," Thoros replied. "The flames show many things and as poor followers we are left to interpret. I have asked the Red God to show me my path and I saw us battling in the mud. I supposed that to mean we might fight in the melee, but another man might have thought it to mean we would duel each other out of malice. Visions can be prophetic, but they can also show us what we already know, or moments from the past."

"You can ask your God for visions?" Jon asked, thinking of the daggers.

"Always. Although before our paths crossed, Jon, my God was silent to me. Now, my path has been revealed."

The gleam in Thoros eye made Jon sit up.

"It is well past the hour of the wolf." Jon nodded towards the door. "I am drunk and tired."

"Of course." Thoros bowed his head.

When he was gone, Jon fell back once more onto the ground with aching muscles. Ghost groaned and shifted at the sudden movement. Turning onto his side, Jon was content to watch the fire and ponder over Thoros' words. If the flames showed him the future, would he meet a dragon? If so, when? If the flames showed him what he already knew, did they confirm that the dragons could fight the Others successfully? If it showed him the past…

Jon frowned. Dragons meant nothing to his past. A nagging suspicion clawed at the back of his mind, but he ignored it dutifully. *It meant nothing… It means nothing. Words in the wind.* With that thought, he fell asleep.

The next day, the competitors from the Hand's Tourney began to filter out of the city. The Frey's were gone by morning light, as well as Ser Patrek. Jon sat in the dining hall and watched various knights leave. A few gave him respectful nods and a passing "Sand" before they dismissed him entirely. Dondarrion departed to join the court at the Red Keep, but only after pulling Jon aside to state that he'd had enough fun tumbling around in the mud and he promised to speak with Lord Stark about Jon's future.

Jon knew Lord Stark would refuse the knighthood, so he sent Dondarrion on his way with a thousand thanks for his patronage.

Samwell joined him twenty minutes later carrying a plate of fruit and sweet cakes.

"How can you eat something so sweet, so early in the morning?" Jon suppressed the urge to wrinkle his nose.

"You don't like sweets?" Sam asked, looking like Jon just killed his cat.

Jon shook his head but stole a piece of fruit from the plate anyway.

"Thought you'd be gone to the Wall," Jon said and looked away, unable to make eye contact. Sam probably sensed his disappointment, but he wouldn't beg him to stay. Sam was a man of his word.
"So did I," Sam replied and shrugged. "But my father's men drank. A lot. And I think they've accumulated a debt at the local… erm, women's place—"

"Brothel."

"—and they're arguing how to settle it."

"Really," Jon replied and searched the tavern subtly with his eyes.

The men with the Tarly sigil were seated away from the crowd and in half-shadow. The largest one was holding his head, as if in pain. A squirrely, sour-faced man was arguing loudly in his ear and gesticulating widely.

"So I think I'll be staying for another day, at least until they've settled their debts."

"They might ride anyway."

"Oh no," Sam said and chuckled without humor. "My father hangs debtors and the thin one, Brendyl, has a bone to pick with the big one, who erm… slept with his daughter some years past, so they'd tattle just to see the other man hang. They don't get along. No, I think we'll be staying for another day."

Jon suddenly remembered Sam's political maneuvering with the election. Sam was smarter than he looked. He was fat, but not dumb. Looking past his friend and towards the Tarly guards once more, Jon wondered if there was any way to turn Sam's temporary stay into a permanent displacement, but he soon dismissed the thought. Sam would be leaving soon, and Jon would be alone once more.

Jon took a deep, calming breath and then entered his father's—the Lord Hand's—solar.

The first thing he noticed was Arya's presence. Jon's little sister was perched on the edge of one of the large, carved seats in front of his father's desk. Arya jumped—like a coiled spring rebounding—and ran to embrace him.

"Jon, Jon, Jon!" Arya cried happily. "I'm so happy you're here. I've been practicing with Needle, every day, I promise. Syrio is so brilliant! I have so much to show you—"

"Arya, your brother and I must speak," Lord Stark interrupted sternly.

Arya spared Jon a sympathetic look before she took a step back. "Talk later?" she asked.

"Yes." Jon's eyes flickered between Lord Stark's deadly quiet countenance and Arya's sweet face. "Later."

Arya nodded and then she was gone. The door clicked shut. In her absence, the silence in the room weighed oppressively between himself and Lord Stark. Jon took note of the disarray on the desk, the empty glasses of wine, and the windows closed shut despite the sweltering heat of the South. Instinct told him to bow and grovel, but Jon would not show regret.

"Kill the Boy," Aemon Targaryen had said, only a year ago.

Thinking of Maester Aemon was a strange shock, as Jon had all but forgotten the wise man who advised him all those years on the Wall. Aemon was still on the Wall. Was it only two years past when he first met the Maester? They'd fed the ravens together and Jon had learned of Aemon's painful past. That night, Jon had lain awake, unable to imagine what it must be like to stand on the
edge of the wild and watch your House burn from afar.

And then, Jon didn't have to imagine, because House Stark was gone within the year, the children and all.

*Was that when the crevasse grew between us, father?* Jon thought to himself, as Lord Stark continued to stare unblinkingly at his bastard son. *And all the words I never said, all the questions I never asked became swallowed in that darkness, deepening the cracks.*

"I am sending you back to Winterfell."

Jon let the words settle between them. He did not trust himself to speak.

"You will take the girls."

"Will that not anger the King and Queen?" Jon had to ask. "Sansa is the prince's betrothed."

"You are not in a position to question my actions," Lord Stark snapped. He paused then, seemingly wrestling with his restraint. "You will escort Arya and Sansa to Winterfell. Sansa is young yet, in a few more years, she may travel South once more to wed the prince, or a lord of my choosing. With your new fame as a tourney competitor, I am certain your return journey will be unharassed."

Jon acknowledged the slight with a grimace.

"I could not refuse Lord Dondarrion."

"Of course you couldn't," Lord Stark admitted. "Regardless, I am sending you away. The situation has become too perilous for you."

Jon didn't understand. For him?

*Why should you care?* He wanted to ask, but held his tongue. *You left me at the Wall, and you knew what it was. A den of thieves and rapists and murderers, and they murdered me. That was dangerous.*

"Jon..." Lord Stark sighed and then seemed to crumble. His shoulders slumped and he placed two hands heavily on the desk. His features softened, and for a brief moment Jon was face-to-face with the gentle father who taught him to ride a horse and hold a sword. "Jon, I know you and I have not —"

"Before I go, I have something to tell you," Jon said before Lord Stark could continue that line of thought. At the moment, he could not bear to start speaking honestly about their relationship. Not now. With any luck, there might be time later. "You may wish to question Sansa's betrothal."

Jon pulled out the large book his father lent him. Finally crossing the distance to his father's large desk, he opened the tome to the appropriate page.

"What have you found?" Lord Stark leaned forward curiously, his previous ire temporarily forgotten in favor of focusing on the task at hand.

Jon paused. The words he was about to speak would be considered treason, but there was no way around it. His father needed to be warned. Speaking these words would accelerate the timeline as he knew it, but would it change those events? Or merely speed their process?

Then again, had he not already altered the course of time irrevocably? Lord Stark was bent on
sending Sansa and Arya back to Winterfell. Tyrion and Lady Catelyn were on their way to King's Landing, with the Kingslayer escorting them, allegedly.

Jon opted for the blunt truth.

"I have reason to suspect that King Robert's children are not his children at all, but the bastard offspring of an incestuous relationship between the Queen and her brother, Jaime Lannister. All of the Baratheon children have black hair, blue eyes, and a strong build. Likewise, all of Robert's bastards have these characteristics. By contrast, Prince Joffrey, Tommen and Princess Myrcella are all gold of hair and green of eye. They share no similarities with the king, not even in personality."

Lord Stark sat back as if he had received a physical blow. His eyes were wide with disbelief. After a long silence, Lord Stark recovered and poured them both a glass of wine.

"Jon Arryn discovered this falsehood..." his father murmured and stroked his beard. "Before he died, he was said to have uttered the words 'the seed is strong'... and it would explain why Catelyn's sister believes her husband was murdered. Lysa Arryn sent a message to my lady wife in secret, warning us. She believes Jon Arryn was murdered by the Lannisters. And his squire, Ser Hugh, was killed in the tourney by a broken lance."

"Gregor Clegane's broken lance..." Jon remembered the tale from the inn.

"He had no family here," Lord Stark said sadly.

"And Lord Stannis fled the city." Jon would never forget the impression King Stannis had left on him. The King of the Narrow Sea. The King who came to the aid of the Night's Watch. "Stannis knew Robert's children were illegitimate. As his younger brother, Stannis is now at the head of the line of succession to the Iron Throne."

All of the puzzle pieces were now placed before Lord Stark. The reason for the Hand's murder was revealed. Jon stared down at the book and the seat Jon Arryn—his namesake—once sat.

"Robert would never listen to his brother," Lord Stark said softly to himself. Jon's mind instantly conjured up an image of stern Stannis. Compared to the boisterous and colorful personality of King Robert, Jon couldn't help but agree with his father's assessment. "They've a long feud. But Stannis was with Jon Arryn when they went to see the king's bastard, and close in his confidence before he left for Dragonstone."

"And at Dragonstone he gathers ships," Jon said, recalling the timeline from years before.

"How do you know that?" Lord Stark looked at him, confused.

"Rumors on the streets." Jon recovered from his mistake quickly and waved a hand.

Lord Stark fell deep into thought and Jon decided to bide his time, sipping the proffered wine modestly. He would need to somehow convince Lord Stark to leave the city before King Robert's death, though he did not know the exact date the king would fall. It could be tomorrow, or next week, or next month, but the drunk King Robert might be the only thing standing between Lord Stark and a pride of lions.

"I will contact Stannis," Lord Stark finally said.

"And if your ravens are being watched and read?" Jon couldn't help but ask.

"I will send the raven personally, and watch it fly," Lord Stark replied and strummed his fingers on
the oak desk. "Yes, and if anyone asks… a marriage proposal, between Shireen and Bran."

The image of a small girl with a face half covered in greyscale floated to the forefront of Jon's mind. "She has greyscale."

"It was cured, or so I've heard. I have it on good authority that she is a sweet girl, and Robert will appreciate the slight that I've offered my crippled son to his brother's only heir," Lord Stark sighed. "And Bran woke last week… I'm sorry, Jon, for delaying in telling you. I was distracted when I saw you at the tourney. He no longer has use of his legs."

Jon always knew Bran would wake, so it was not a worry for him, though it did irk him that his father did not consider Jon's concern. At the Wall, Jon had worried endlessly over Bran's condition until word came that his brother had woken.

"It is good that he is awake," Jon said, truly meaning it. "I wish him all the best fortune. Knowing Bran's spirit, I'm certain he'll overcome these odds. Send him my love."

"I will,"— Lord Stark stood—"and I will think on all you have said."

"There is one other matter," Jon stopped him before he left his desk. Lord Stark slowly lowered himself back down into his seat. "Lord Baelish."

"Catelyn's friend. He has been helpful, but you need not fear. I do not trust him."

"I do not believe in Tyrion's guilt," Jon said firmly. "And it was Baelish who first pointed a finger at the dwarf."

Lord Stark sighed. "We have already spoken of this. The imp will face trial in King Robert's court—"

"A court stacked in favor of the Lannisters. The catspaw said 'a young, blond noble'. Tyrion is nearing thirty. He is noble, and blonde, but more importantly, a dwarf. With his life on the line, why would the assassin lie?"

Lord Stark rubbed his beard and didn't respond. Jon knew he was pushing his luck, but his intuition told him to follow this train of thought. "You have reason to doubt."

"I do…" his father's nostrils flared. "Lord Baelish has been in love with Catelyn for years. When she was betrothed to my elder brother, Littlefinger challenged him to a duel for her hand. He lost, obviously, and Brandon left him with a scar and a lifetime of humiliation. And yet… he has offered his assistance putting together this investigation, and it has been valuable."

"A lifetime of humiliation is a grand thing to forgive."

"You want me to suspect him."

"Ask others about the dagger," Jon insisted. "There is more to this story."

Jon was surprised by Lord Stark's quiet laughter. "If it please you, Lord Jon."

The jest was meant to be kind, but it nearly sent Jon running from the room. Lord Snow, he had been called mockingly, and then with respect in the latter half of his term as commander. Lord Snow.

"When shall I depart?"

"I will… perhaps I said that in anger, Jon. If anything happens, you know what to do. You have
given me much to think on, and I may still need your assistance."

Lord Stark spoke reluctantly. Jon couldn't help but feel his pride wounded by the hesitant offering.

"Only when I am useful to you, will you keep me by your side."

The words were laden with sorrow, not anger, but still, Jon's father stiffened in surprise and his eyes grew wide. Jon had been insubordinate before, but that had been in his youth and he'd outgrown that nature. Never before had he been so insultatory.

Jon silently cursed himself. He had not meant to say those words aloud. They hung awkwardly in the air between them. He suddenly, fervently wished the gods would strike him down right there, and send him back once more, simply so he could stop those words from leaving his lips.

"Forgive me," Jon whispered. "I am exhausted and my sleep has been troubled. I did not mean to speak so plainly. I would—"

"No." Lord Stark closed his eyes. "You spoke only what was in your heart. Jon…"

His father rose and crossed the distance between them. Jon felt the heavy weight of two strong hands settle on his shoulders.

"Jon, I know I have injured you." Jon opened his mouth to protest, but Lord Stark silenced him with a look. "You will not say it, and I am not entirely certain how this chill came between us, but I would have it stop. Forgive me. Whatever I have done, I am still your father."

Jon waded in uncertainty. Of course, his father sensed his distress. The man had known him since he was an infant. Sighing internally, Jon shoved aside all doubts and nodded his head.

But then, mid-nod, the thought came to him again. The thought his drunken, inebriated self had invented in the depths of his loneliness. The thought he begged himself never to think again, but there it was: a monstrosity that roared to life, nagging, clawing incessantly at the back of his mind. It crawled into the crevasse and made its home, pushing him further and further away from his father, the only father he had ever known.

Jon felt the blood drain from his face. A terror consumed him.

"I—I must leave." Jon stepped away and averted his gaze. "And you must write Lord Stannis."

"Jon? Jon, are you well?"

Jon fled the Tower of the Hand. Running down the steps of the Red Keep he paused to take a great heaving breath and froze when he came face to face with the likeness of a dragon. It was only in the tiles of a wall mosaic, but it stopped him in his tracks.

The breath he stopped to find left him in a rush. It took a minute of paralyzed shock for him to come to his senses.

_I am still your father_, Lord Stark had said. Jon pinched his nose and closed his eyes, feeling a headache coming on. _I am still your father._

_I am being ridiculous_, Jon thought. _The babe died. Honest Ned, they call him. A side effect. Thoros said it was magic. A fluke, a trick…_

The corridor with the mosaic was attached to one of the smaller dining halls and Jon felt another
wave of panic rising when he heard soft footsteps echo on the marble floor behind him, but he stomached his raw nerves and turned to face whoever intruded on his solitude.

He almost laughed at the sight of Sansa and Jeyne Poole. He had imagined his father or Jory had followed him, and was relieved instead to see two harmless ladies from Winterfell.

"Lady Sansa, Jeyne." Jon bowed. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," Sansa replied as she swept passed with Jeyne on her arm. Jon didn't mind. He did not have much to say. Jeyne sent him a look from under her eyelashes that Jon had trouble interpreting, and then she spoke.

"Congratulations on winning third in the melee, Jon." Jeyne smiled sweetly. "I had not known you were such an accomplished swordsman."

Sansa tugged on her arm, looking irritated.

"What will you do with all the winnings?" Jeyne persisted. Sansa stopped tugging and instead turned to Jon curiously.

"Winnings?"

"The prize for third, dear Sansa," Jeyne said, "20,000 dragons went to the winner of the melee. 10,000 to the second and 200 to the third."

"What?" Sansa gaped, then she turned to Jon. "What will you do with that money?"

Judging by her tone, she was implying that he didn't know how to handle that much gold. He didn't, but he resented the implication that he was stupid. He had managed the ledgers of the Night's Watch well enough, but little Sansa didn't know that.

"I have asked your father's temporary steward to hold onto my winnings," Jon replied politely, nonetheless. In truth, he had hidden a small portion of the prize in his room, in case of an emergency. "Until I return to Winterfell."

"You'll return North?" Jeyne said, with no small trace of disappointment.

"Eventually," Jon replied. "But until that time, I shall remain at Lord Stark's side."

"As you should," Sansa said dismissively. "Come, Jeyne."

Jeyne gave him another small smile as she allowed her lady to pull her along, and he couldn't help but smile back. During their conversation, Jon had remembered that she had been sweet on him a few months back, before the king's party departed from Winterfell. Perhaps she still was, and he couldn't bring himself to be rude.

"Oh, Jon!" Sansa called back. "Arya's asking for you."

Back at the Inn, Jon threw back a small horn of ale. He normally didn't indulge in drink, but today he needed something to calm his nerves. His hands still shook from the sudden, unbidden, untempered thoughts that drove a wedge between himself and his father. The familiar noise of the Painted Lady and the comfort of the common room soon lulled him into a relaxed state of mind.

Jon tilted and spun the amber liquid in his horn lazily, all the while staring at his dark reflection. Brown hair, silver eyes. The sight comforted him.
"Jon Sand." Thoros of Myr appeared suddenly.

Jon jumped and then groaned at the look of barely restrained excitement on the red priest's face. "Not now, Thoros, I've a mind to retire early. Yesterday's late night must be catching up to me."

"Apologies, but I've something you will be interested in seeing. Very interested."

"It cannot wait?"

"It won't be here tomorrow."

Jon sighed again, grasping tightly at his fragile sanity. "Very well, as long as it's not another training exercise."

"No, indeed," Thoros said grinning and then stood.

Together, they left the inn and walked into the crowded streets of King's Landing. It was dusk and the light was fading. Commerce was still strong in the aftermath of the King's Tourney, and many lords and knights would remain in the city for weeks to come, but Jon found King's Landing lacking after the excitement of the competition.

Out in the open, Jon felt the warmth of the ale sinking into his bones. Yes, he was much more relaxed.

They passed traders calling for their coin. Several spectators recognized Thoros' red clothing, and by association, Jon Sand. A few called to them and they waved their hand in turn, as was the custom on the streets of King's Landing.

Thoros led him away from the Painted Lady. They turned onto the street that housed the barracks of the Gold Cloaks. Jon looked at him sideways, curious.

"Through here," he gestured and Jon followed him down a neat looking alley and through a set of double doors. A pair of Gold Cloaks exchanged pleasantries with Thoros, and they were allowed to pass through a second set of doors and down a long hallway. Finally, they stopped in front of a barred room and Jon knew where they were.

"You wanted to show me the jail?"

"No, I wanted to show you it's occupants."

Thoros took a torch from the wall and held it close to the bars. Inside, Jon could see two dirty men. Their mouths were gagged and their feet were chained, but otherwise they seemed unharmed. And angry. Jon stared, recognizing both men from the inn.

"Tarly's men?!" Jon exclaimed and glanced back at Thoros. "What happened?"

"Called in their debts. Called in a lot of debts. These two," Thoros jerked his head at the two men, "got into the wrong pockets, and when I found out that the man who loaned them the money ended up dead, I felt it was my duty to the crown to report their wrongdoings to the proper authorities."

Jon blinked. The men in the prison cell glared angrily at Thoros. Jon felt a wave of disgust and angrily dragged Thoros away from the cell and toward the stairwell.

"What's your meaning?"

"Meaning," Thoros whispered with emphasis. "Your friend Tarly, won't have to go to the Wall after
all. Say he got lost along the way, fell of his horse, waylaid by bogmen. Whatever the case, he may need to renounce his inheritance, but you've got your man."

"How… why did you do this?" Jon asked, confused and slightly fearful of Thoros' motivations.

The man in red looked at him meaningfully.

"Because… I saw you in the flames, Jon. I saw all three of us. You, me, and Tarly, on a ship bound for Essos. I saw a great battle in the snow, and a sword of light. When I asked for a vision of Azor Ahai. I saw you. You made the magic return. You are the unburnt. And you will need loyal men in the Battle for the Dawn."

Jon was speechless.

Stannis, he thought frantically. *Stannis wielded lightbringer, and called himself Azor Ahai.* The red witch titled King Stannis the prophesied one and gave him a magical sword.

*You've got the wrong man!* Jon took a step backwards, but the red priest inched forward with that familiar gleam in his eye.

Thoros of Myr was confused. The red priest was dreadfully, horribly confused and Jon was caught in the middle of it.

"I'm your man, Jon Snow," Thoros said with an air of finality. "I'm your man, and there's naught you can do about it." He drew his sword and got down on one knee, "I, Ser Thoros of Myr, a priest of R'hllor, do hereby swear an oath of fealty to Jon Snow. I promise to be faithful to his cause. I will not cause him harm, and I will serve him in any way he sees fit. In peace or in war. Until the end of my days."
Lord Varys

Chapter Summary

Jon and Lord Varys have a meeting.

Chapter Notes

A/N This chapter is short for a few reasons. Primarily, I had an extra long chapter I needed to break up. Next chapter is more intense and involves Jon's departure, but I am in the midst of my midterms so it will at least be another week before I can post. Thanks for your patience!

Jon woke the next morning in a fog.

Late last night, he had tossed and turned under the sheets, unable to silence the storm of thoughts that raged through his disquieted mind. He eventually left the bed to sit in front of the empty fire grate, and there, he succumbed to a fitful half-sleep full of nightmares.

First, he dreamt of his father's execution, and the crowd's roar of approval as Lord Stark's disembodied head came tumbling down the steps of Baelor's sept and rolled to a stop at Jon's feet. Next, he dreamt of Ygritte's dead body climbing over the Wall, while he stood paralyzed at the top, unable to move as she crept closer and closer. And last, he dreamt of silver haired man singing a sad song to a dark haired maiden, his voice drifting through the empty halls of a tall tower.

That last dream frightened him the most. After that, he remained awake in the chair, wide-eyed and hoping for the sun to rise. In the chair, he thought of his father and the past. Winterfell and the Wall, and all that had transpired in the last few months.

The argument with his father left him feeling a mixture of guilt and shame. Guilt, that he could not muster the courage to confide completely in Lord Stark all his knowledge and doubts and fears, and shame, shame for his actions and his deceit of late.

Jon held his head in his hands and sighed.

The one good thing that had happened during his time in King's Landing was his reunion with Sam. Sam, his steadfast friend. The friend he lied to, again and again. First, about Gilly's babe and now… Jon recalled the look in Samwell Tarly's eyes when Thoros informed him of his escort's fate.

Jon had stumbled into the common hall tiredly, Thoros in tow. They found Sam sitting alone, looking lost without his father's guards to bully him into buying another round of ale.

"W-what am I going to do now? I can't make the journey North alone?! I'd never survive!" Sam had despaired. "Oh, this is a right mess."

"You can always stay on with me, Sam. I needed your help with the book of lineages, and I'll likely
need your help again." Jon still felt guilty for the deception, and that guilt had been magnified by Sam's grateful expression.

"Are you—are you certain?"

"Not like I haven't got the coin to feed you."

"Oh, th-thank you, Jon! I promise, I'll help you—and your father—anyway I can."

*Was it fate?* Jon wondered, staring at the empty fire grate. *The will of the Red God? Or Thoros' meddling?*

*Thoros,* Jon ran a heavy hand over his brow. Jon nearly slapped him when the old knight had bent the knee to swear his service as "a priest of R'hllor", but he'd been speechless when the red priest claimed that Jon's appearance at the Painted Lady had renewed his magic. Thoros claimed it had brought forth visions of the future and the Battle for the Dawn… and other such fantastical things.

In another life, Jon might not have believed it, but he had seen too much beyond the Wall and known too much magic to deny its existence. Reluctantly, Jon had accepted the oath.

Ghost whined and Jon left his chair to dress and wash. The water was cool to the touch, so Jon stripped and poured it over himself, scrubbing vigorously with the washcloth as if he could erase the memories of yesterday with enough force. By the time he left his room to walk Ghost through the courtyard, he felt cleaner and more alert.

Ghost was growing, Jon realized dimly as he exercised the beast back and forth across the yard. The white direwolf was already the size of the largest of dogs. Soon, he'd reach past Jon's hip and Jon would have a real dilemma on his hands.

Jon hated the thought of leaving the direwolf in the Kingswood, or in the North, but Ghost would survive. They'd been parted before, and the massive wolf always found a way back to Jon. *Even through time?* Jon wondered, gazing into Ghost's red, knowing eyes.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when Jon took Ghost by the neck and dragged him inside. The inn was blessedly empty today, and Jon happily closed his door behind him with a quiet click, eager to be alone. Today, he needed to clear his mind. Maybe he'd take his horse on a ride—a long ride—through the Kingswood.

A throat cleared.

Jon whirled around, drawing Sweetsinger from its sheath. The steel rang in the early morning silence, its tip pointed at the jugular of the man who'd just cleared his throat.

A *round man,* Jon thought. *A round, bald man in grubby robes is sitting at my table and eating my bread.*

The stranger stared cross eyed at the tip of the sword before dropping the bread. He was garbed in a patchwork of unsavory fabrics, and smelled faintly of fish and shit. Jon's nostrils curled. A thief? He certainly looked like an unsavory character, but the rigidity of his posture and the delicate fold of his hands reminded Jon of a highborn lord.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my rooms?"

Ghost watched menacingly from the sidelines. The wolf knew what drawn steel meant, and bared his teeth at the fat man.
Jon thought the intruder looked familiar, but he could not place the man's face.

"I apologize for startling you, Jon Snow. I operate with the utmost discretion, and at times, my work requires the use of several secret passageways throughout the city. I did not want the many spies of King's Landing to know of our meeting today."

The confession—spoken in a soft and comforting tone—only served to alarm Jon.

"Who are you?" Spies? Was he being watched? "What spies?"

The bald man tittered and Jon wrinkled his nose in disgust. It was a feminine sound, and it only served to unnerve him further. Satin was feminine, but in a pleasant way. His previous steward was clean and well-mannered whereas this man's presence was unsettling, and Jon could not pinpoint exactly why.

"Oh, too many to count. Three alone at this inn, watching you and all manner of comings and goings in this fine city. Do not concern yourself with their affairs, for that is my business." The man folded his hands in a pair of large, billowy sleeves. "I believe introductions are in order. I am Lord Varys, Master of Whispers."

Lord Varys stood and bowed slowly, until the tips of his sleeves brushed the ground.

"Lord Varys…" Jon repeated slowly. He raked his eyes over the chubby man's face. Now that his identity had been revealed, Jon could acknowledge that he'd seen Varys' face before, during his comings and goings around the Red Keep. Recognition dawned on him and he lowered the tip of his sword. "You snuck into my room. Like a thief in the night."

"A necessary precaution," Lord Varys said and sat back down. The Master of Whispers popped the last of Jon's bread into his mouth and chewed heartily. "I've been meaning to speak to you for some time, Jon Snow. You've made so many small ripples during your time here. If I wasn't an observant Spider, I might never have noticed your presence. Sneaking into the city alongside Lady Stark, altering your clothes and hair to assume the identity of Ser Sand, delaying Samwell Tarly's departure, competing in the melee—though that you did quite publicly—whispering such vicious accusations in the Lord Hand's ear. One wonders about your loyalties. Your motivations."

"My loyalties are my own." Jon frowned, panic slowly rising as Lord Varys revealed the depth of his knowledge. He gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. "How do you know all this?"

"My boy, I am the Lord of Whispers."

Jon locked eyes with Lord Varys. The two silently pitted their wills against one another before Jon sighed, and sat down across the small table. Ghost padded forward cautiously and sniffed at the other man's feet, only content to lie down when the Lord of Whispers offered his hand to the dire wolf. Ghost licked his palm, satisfied the lord meant no harm.

"And where are your loyalties, my lord?" Jon asked. "If you told all this to the King, or the Queen, I'd be in irons right now. Hanging from my thumbs, rotting in the black cells of the Keep."

"The King does not concern himself with small matters that, as of yet, pose no threat to the realm."

Lord Varys smiled magnanimously.

"Does he not?" Jon's eyebrows rose. "How convenient for you."

"And for you." Lord Varys inclined his head.
Jon fought the urge to fidget. Lord Varys had a penetrating stare and Jon wished to reveal nothing of himself.

"You admit I pose not threat to the realm, so why visit? Why question me yourself?"

"Curiosity, mostly," Lord Varys said smoothly. "I wanted to meet you. Get a feel for your character and perhaps, suss out your loyalties, myself."

"My loyalties," Jon replied, "are to my family."

"Not the realm?"

"And the realm, both." Jon said firmly.

"Odd." Lord Varys cocked his head to one side in a manner that wholly unnerved Jon. "I believe you."

"If that's all, my lord?" Jon made to stand, but the Lord giggled once more and held up his hand.

"Oh no, my boy, I'm not nearly done with you yet."

Jon lowered himself back down into his seat cautiously.

"The matter you've been investigating with Lord Stark..." Jon's mind flew to the book of lineages, and the golden heads of Joffrey, Tommen, and Myrcella. *Lord Varys must know*, Jon decided. *What reason does he have to keep the Queen's secrets?* "Since coming to the Capital, Lord Stark has foolishly followed in the footsteps of his late predecessor, Jon Arryn. I would advise you to abandon this path, Jon Snow, and urge your father to do the same."

Jon narrowed his eyes but nodded. "Lord Stark is eager to return to his homeland in the North. If his duty did not tie him to the King, I'm sure he would rather have stayed there."

"Of course, we all long for home," Lord Varys said in a sympathetic voice, his eyes strangely distant. "Would you leave with him, Jon Snow?"

*I saw you in the flames, Jon Snow. I saw all three of us. You, me, and Tarly, on a ship bound for Essos.*

"I would."

"And on the matter of Sam Tarly..."

"A good friend. A great friend. He would be wasted at the Wall." Jon stopped himself from cringing at the duplicity. "I want to offer him a position in my father's household."

"Hmm, and your deception? Why the surname Sand, instead of Snow?"

"My mother was from Dorne," Jon said, thinking furiously. "I wished to honor her and avoid detection."

"Ah." Lord Varys nodded. "Your mother. I have had some of my birds investigating that matter."

Jon blinked. Lord Varys' revelation was very sudden and unexpected. The matter was personal, and Jon allowed a degree of anger to creep into his tone. "That is not your place."

"Oh." Lord Varys waved his hands. "I meant no offense. No offense at all, Jon Snow. I merely
wished to extend the information in good faith. Sadly, my investigation led nowhere. The usual suspects turned up dry."

"What suspects?" Jon asked incredulously. There are suspects?

To his credit, Lord Varys did not repeat some blithe phrase about his father's wishes. He did not look down upon Jon with disdain for his bastard status. Lord Varys did not even blink or find the question strange. Instead, the bald man began to rattle off the names of Jon's suspected mothers, as if discussing a recent bout of good weather.

"Chiefly, Lady Ashara Dayne. Your father's previous affair with Lady Ashara was well known. Unfortunately, their last interaction and the date of your birth, do not fall in the right time period. Ashara Dayne's child was born stillborn and that evidence is incontrovertible. I followed the trail of your wet nurse, Wylla, and though she did originate from the kitchens of Starfall, again, the trail runs cold. I am not usually so dumbfounded by a bastard's birth, Jon Snow, but you are an unexpected mystery."

A mystery… Jon looked down at his hands. A mystery… or a lie, a vicious voice whispered in his ear and he ignored it.

"Are there any others?"

"None. But I would not dare approach your father for more information. He does not trust me." Lord Varys smirked, as if secretly enjoying a private joke.

"He trusts few." Jon swallowed thickly. His thoughts turned to the letters hidden under his mattress.

"You want my father to leave King's Landing." Jon said and nodded. "So do I."

"Yes, and you greatly desire to know the identity of your birth mother, Jon Snow. If only there was a way to assist one another. A mutual arrangement. A joining of efforts…"

Lord Varys trailed off meaningfully. Jon did not respond.

"Commit to the task I have set forth for you, and I shall do the same, if you wish. Perhaps there is a stone I have not yet turned. Jon Snow," he announced Jon's name by way of excusing himself.

Lord Varys bowed, his sleeves touched the floor.

Jon rose and bowed in return. When he straightened, he could only gape in astonishment as Lord Varys pulled a hood over his head and bent his back, suddenly appearing as an old man. The old man hobbled out of the room, never to be seen at the Painted Lady Inn again, at least, not in that disguise.

Magic, Jon thought to himself and retook his seat. He poured himself a generous glass of water, and after a moment's hesitation, dumped it over his sweating head.

"Am I a fool?" Jon asked Ghost. The direwolf didn't answer and lay down in front of the window. He was still a puppy, but a large puppy.

"That's what I thought," Jon said to himself and shook the water droplets out of his hair.

Settling down on his bed, Jon made sure to check under the mattress.

The pages were gone.
Jon upended the mattress, scattering his clothes and the sheets. Jon tore through his satchel, his clothing and books on his mantlepiece. He upended the basin, pushed the table aside, searching the ground for anything, even one small forgotten scrap of paper.

Ghost skittered backwards against the wall and bared his teeth.

"No," he said aloud. "No, no, no."

_Thief!_ Jon thought furiously. Lord Varys had stolen from him. _Liar! Wretch!_

He found the book of lineages intact and undisturbed from its resting place. The Spider had left the cloth with the Targaryen sigil too. The gold he'd hidden was also untouched, not a coin out of place. _Why would he take the pages? How long has the Spider been watching? Did he know about the letters?_

Jon held the large tome in one hand, and the red Targaryen sigil in the other. He fought against the overwhelming feeling of defeat that spread from his heart, down his limbs. He felt weighed down, crushed by an invisible force.

"The babe is dead," Jon told no one.
A/N I want to let readers know that this next month or so might be slow, but I plan to update more in December. Thanks for the reviews that people left asking to update, it helped motivate me to get going.

Favorite scene from the television series? Mine is when Dany sacks Slaver's Bay.

"Jon! Jon! Wake up!"

Jon's eyes flew open. He was still in his room at the Painted Lady. The curtains were drawn, and a shadow loomed over him: not a shadow, a girl. The small, petite figure at his bedside shook him roughly.

"Arya?"

"Jon! There's no time, you must help Father!"

"Arya?" Jon turned his gaze to the window; it was not yet light out. "Why are you here? How'd you find me?"

He swung his legs over the bed, and Arya pulled hurriedly on his arms. "Hurry! Hurry!" she whispered. She danced on her toes, her gaze darting left and right, as if searching for an unknown attacker.

"What's going on?" Jon asked as he pulled on a pair of pants and a black tunic. The urgency in Arya's voice had him moving quickly. He fumbled for his sword belt and Arya handed it to him.

"Father's been attacked!" Arya's eyes were wide with panic.

"What?" Jon's face paled as he jerkily tied the knots to his tunic. "When? Why?"

"Yesterday afternoon!" Arya was pulling on his arm again and the muscles in his right shoulder protested.

"Arya!" Jon grasped her by the shoulders and forced her to sit down at the table. There was too much he didn't know. Jon alone could not storm the Red Keep, like Arya clearly desired.

"Stop. Explain. Right now."

Arya wriggled against his grip, but eventually settled when she realized Jon would not budge. "Yesterday, Father and Jory went to the brothel." At Jon's look of disbelief, Arya scoffed. "I don't know why they were there. But when they left, the Kingslayer came with Lannister soldiers and broke father's leg! It's true! And now he's in bed and he hasn't woke in ages!"

By the end of her story, Arya was crying and reaching for Jon's tunic. Jon held her in his arms and shushed her, running a soothing hand through her tangled, muddy hair. Jon's head was spinning. Why would Jory and Lord Stark visit a brothel? His mind went to the blacksmith's boy that
resembled the King. Robert's bastard. Everyone knew the King frequented the brothels more often than the small Council chambers. Could Lord Stark have been looking for further evidence against the Queen? It was the most likely explanation.

"Arya, calm yourself." He held her face in his hands gently and looked into her eyes. "Can you tell me why a knight of the Kingsguard attacked the Hand of the King?"

"Because Mother took the Imp!" She cried into his stomach and Jon's heart thudded painfully. "She lied! Mother took the imp to the Eyrie and they refused the Kingslayer passage through the Bloody Gate, so he came back! And it's treason to refuse the King's orders!"

So it has begun, he thought, the War of the Five Kings. Lady Stark took Tyrion Lannister. No, she stole him. Despite all of Jon's warnings to Lord Stark, he could not have prevented these events. Somewhere in his heart, Jon knew Tyrion was not to blame for Bran's fall, but it seemed Lady Stark was determined to find justice for her crippled son—even if the executioner's axe fell on the neck of the wrong, misshapen head.

"A grievous error," Jon spoke aloud, more to himself than to Arya. "This will begin a war… wait. How'd you find me?"

Arya pulled away from him then and furiously wiped at her tears. Jon let her use his sleeve.

"I told you I wanted to talk to you, but you never came." Arya glared at him then, eyes full of anger and Jon felt a twinge of remorse.

"I am sorry, Arya," he said, coloring his voice with regret. "Lord Stark and I… I haven't been in the Hand's Tower much and I didn't think you missed me. But we are together now, are we not?"

"Of course I missed you, you're my brother!" Arya exclaimed and Jon's heart warmed. He could not have loved her more. The sweet, wild little sister who looked so much like him.

Arya sniffed. "I have had so much to tell you. I have a dancing master, Syrio, and he told me to chase cats. I've got to be quick as a snake. I was chasing cats and…"

Arya proceeded to spin a long tale. Jon sat and listened, trying to piece together his sister's nearly incoherent story—punctuated by bouts of sniffing and sobs—about perfumed men plotting in the dungeons, Sansa's lion babies, and their father's investigations surrounding Lord Arryn and Ser Hugh of the Vale. The news of Tyrion's abduction reached King's Landing yesterday afternoon via a man of the Night's Watch, Yoren, who informed Lord Stark of his lady wife's actions.

"... Father was concerned. The Kingslayer was wroth, they all said. I was listening at the door—"

If anything happens, you know what to do. Jon would obey his father's last commands.

"Arya." Jon placed a hand on her shoulder. They didn't have much time, and Jon could piece together the story from there. "You've done very well. Thank you for telling me all you know. I think… I think now is the time we must leave the city. You, me, and Sansa. Father always intended for me to take you back North. And now, it's time. The city is too dangerous for you Starks."

"Thank the Gods." Arya flew at him again and Jon grunted at the impact. "I hate this place! I hate the court and stupid Sansa. I want to go home!"

"I'll take you there," he told her. "I will take you home. Stay here for now."

Jon left Arya with Ghost. Moments later he was banging on the doors to Thoros' and Sam's rooms.
Sam woke and dressed slowly enough after a quick explanation from Jon. The son of Tarly yawned and bumbled around, searching for his things. Thoros was already dressed. The Red Priest had had a vision about wolves and lions and krakens, and was ready to depart at once. Jon took it all in stride. Thoros' visions were becoming a nightly occurrence—or so said the knight—and the Red Priest had sworn an oath. For now, Jon would trust his word.

Together, the three companions gathered in Jon's room. Arya stared at Thoros' sword with open curiosity, and the old knight patted its hilt. "Fear not, little Lady, t'will not spontaneously catch fire unless I will it." Arya grinned at that.

"What's the plan?" she asked, after introductions had been made.

"Sam…" Jon turned to his old friend and smiled sadly. "You are no great warrior." Sam blushed and nodded his agreement. "I want you to take what's left of my purse and find us a cabin or two, for the next ship to leave at dawn. It doesn't matter where they're going. We are leaving."

In the end, it was agreed upon that Arya would accompany Sam to the docks. Together, they'd barter for a cabin on whatever ship that would have them. Jon had taken half of his winnings from the Tourney and hidden it in a small chest under his bed. He'd used the money to continue paying the Painted Lady and for day-to-day expenses, but now the gold would pay for their rooms, and a captain's silence.

Jon gave the small chest to Sam. Sam was smart, and Jon knew he was more capable of this task than the task of rescuing Sansa.

Thoros and Jon would enter the Red Keep, silently, using Arya's secret passage. With any luck, by daybreak, Sansa, Arya, Jon, Sam, and Thoros would meet outside the River Gate, close to the Blackwater docks.

Jon hands were shaking by the time they exited the inn. On his back, he carried the small satchel he'd kept since Winterfell. Within it, he'd hidden the book of lineages and the red banner he couldn't bring himself to leave behind. At the last second, he'd thrown on the Stark tabard that Ser Jory had given him weeks ago.

This was it. In the last war, Sansa and Arya had been taken captive by the crown. Both sold as brides. Arya had gone to the slime, Ramsay Bolton, and Sansa to the Imp.

_That will not happen, _Jon thought. _There will be no weddings, red, or otherwise. There will be no weddings._ He allowed himself one final glance at the inn of the Painted Lady, and into the dark stables, where he would forever leave the brown mare his father had gifted him. It was time.

The trip to the docks was tense and quiet, the air filled with nervous energy. Their group stuck to the side streets. Jon urged them all to keep their hoods up, and their faces down, although it seemed a folly to hide their identities when a large, white direwolf was trailing after them. Jon did his best to keep Ghost under foot and in the shadows, often chasing him away from the main street.

Arya led the way down to the Blackwater. She skirted in and out of alleyways, resembling the cats she loved to chase. Jon wondered how she might have learned the streets, but then he figured it was just Arya's nature. No doubt she had escaped the Keep many a time to explore the city, as she used to explore Winterfell.

Eventually, they reached the docks. As soon as they'd passed the gates, Ghost bolted, sprinting into the Blackwater. Jon let him go and watched him disappear into the distance, knowing he'd return once he spent his energy.
Sam was the last to arrive. The lord’s son was panting heavily and went to his knees to catch his breath. Jon and Thoros were only slightly better off and eager to depart.

"Lead the way, Arya," Jon said and looked anxiously at the dark sky. Still no sign of dawn, but he felt it approaching in only a few hours. The youngest Stark girl jogged away from the designated path, and waded through the mud. She led Jon and Thoros to a small crack in the walls, and pointed inside.

Jon peered into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Are you certain?"

"Quite." Arya pointed at a large, dead crab on the shore. "That was how I remembered where it was. It’s a long way up, but stick to the center path."

"Take care of my sister, Sam," Jon told his panting brother. Sam nodded, red-faced. Unable to speak, he waved a quick goodbye. Arya embraced Jon one last time before both Jon and Thoros slid sideways through the crack and into the tunnel.

Jon would always remember the experience of crawling through that bitter, inky blackness. In the dark, it was hard to tell which way was forward. The passage was narrow and cramped, and the air was stale and sometimes downright repugnant. Jon had the distinct feeling they might be crawling through a sewer.

The journey was made bearable by Thoros’ presence. After about three hundred paces, by Jon’s count, the tunnel widened enough to allow Thoros to unsheathe his sword. He lit the blade with a muttered spell and Jon’s eyes burned at the sight. The old knight grinned and gestured for Jon to lead.

The tunnel widened even further, and the cracked, uneven stone became smooth. Jon stepped forward cautiously, careful of the way his boots cracked on rat’s bones and aware they might be approaching the Keep. The journey so far had been mostly uphill, over rough staircases and steep inclines. But now, the narrow corridor leveled. Finally, they stepped into a large chamber. The fire from Thoros’ blade illuminated the room.

A dragon skull with eyes of fire.

Jon’s heart leapt into his throat and he forced himself to take a calming breath. Thoros gravitated towards his side and together, they stared silently at the massive maw of Balerion, the Black Dread.

"Amazing," Thoros whispered. Jon could only nod, still slightly shaken at the sight.

That is what I must bring to the Wall. Jon touched a tooth tentatively. Was it his imagination, or were the bones still warm? This is the fire we need, to defeat the Others and the army of the dead. Am I mad?

Thoros took the lead now, having greater knowledge of the Red Keep and its layout. Jon followed silently. They passed more dragon skulls, each one smaller than the last, and then they ascended a great flight of stairs. After what seemed like an eternity, the stairs ended and Thoros held up his hand, extinguishing his sword. He signalled for Jon to follow, single column.

They crept through another five corridors, and down a flight of stairs before Jon heard footsteps. Fortunately, they were close to an open courtyard. They hid behind a line of tall bushes when a patrol of Lannister soldiers came into view. Jon held his breath until they passed, exchanging glances with Thoros.
Once the danger had passed, the two companions continued silently through the halls and into the middle bailey. The Tower of the Hand was in sight. Jon saw two of his father's guards positioned outside the side entrance. Silently, he approached.

Harwin, the son of the Master of Horses at Winterfell, took notice of him first. He was a stocky man, who'd served Lord Stark for many years. Jon shed his hood and revealed his face.

"Jon Snow," Harwin stated in surprise. "Why the midnight visit?"

"Jon. Ser Thoros," the man to Harwin's right said, and eyed them both suspiciously. Jon could not place his face, though he looked familiar.

"I have come at my father's bidding, Harwin." Jon nodded to Thoros at his right. "Ser Thoros has sworn to assist me in this matter."

"Your father's unconscious," Harwin said bluntly, looking at Jon with suspicion. "He cannot give orders."

Jon sighed, wondering how to earn this man's trust. He took a step closer to the entrance and lowered his voice. "Lord Stark and I had previously agreed that I would take my sisters North, should tensions escalate and the Capital grow too dangerous. Lord Stark urged the utmost secrecy in this matter. He was concerned about the welfare of his daughters, as I am concerned for my sisters. I swear to you, Harwin, this is the truth."

Harwin gave him a hard look. Jon returned the glare with equal ferocity. "I must bring my sister's North," he reiterated. "It is of paramount importance."

The old guard hesitated a moment longer before stepping aside. "Don't make me regret this, Jon Snow." Jon nodded and swept past, Thoros on his heels.

Jon climbed the steps to his father's rooms, needing to see his unconscious body himself. It was difficult to believe. The Hand had been attacked, and the Imp had been taken captive. It was all starting again, and he felt powerless.

Jon stopped outside the Hand's solar, recalling the last conversation with his father and the look of betrayal on Lord Stark's face, as Jon rejected his offer to reconcile. He grimaced in shame.

"Jon?" Thoros whispered. "We haven't much time."

He swallowed the protest on his lips and nodded, eyes searching for Sansa's quarters. The first door he opened was obviously Arya's room, judging by the mess and three cats. The next door over was freshly painted and boasted a wreath of roses.

He knocked politely. No reply. He called for her, "Sansa, it's Jon," and knocked once more.

"Go away," she mumbled sleepily. Jon fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Sansa, you must wake. I am taking you to Winterfell." He banged on the door. "Ready yourself." Jon waited until he heard her mumbled protests and her feet on the floor. His red-haired half sister opened the door only a crack.

"Jon?" she eyed Thoros in the background. The knight turned away. Sansa opened the door more completely to look at him. "What are you saying? I can't go North, I am to marry the Prince."

"Your father's orders," Jon said plainly. "I am sorry, Lady Sansa. We must away."

"But… no…" her eyes filled with tears, anger twisted her face. "No… I can't."
"Now, Sansa," Jon ordered. "I will not disobey your father. Our lives may be in danger."

"I'm supposed to marry him, though!" she cried, forgetting herself. Jon winced as her voice got louder. "I'm going to be Queen! I'm supposed to be Queen!"

Jon held up his hands in defeat and closed his eyes. This would be difficult. Jon had seen the looks Sansa had thrown Joffrey the first time around, in Winterfell. The girl was positively smitten.

"In a few months, or years," Jon promised, "I will take you South again. But for now, your father orders that you return North. You are young yet, Lady Sansa. There is time for all your dreams to come true. Please, we must away."

Sansa sniffed, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. She looked imploringly at her half brother. Jon sighed and tried once more. "Your father will straighten this mess out, and we'll be back before you know it."

Sansa wavered at the door, still gazing at him with wet eyes. Jon frowned and she finally gave in with a huff. "Fine!" Sansa snapped the door shut and Jon heard her gathering her things. "Go get Jeyne."

Jon did not know where Jeyne was, but with luck, tried the rooms next door and found success. The lady in waiting blushed red as a tomato to find Jon waiting outside her door and—after a confusing conversation—finally deduced his reason for waking her was not what she assumed, to Thoros' great amusement. Jeyne dressed and skirted into Sansa's rooms. Jon wandered into his father's room while Sansa and her handmaiden prepared, and looked down at Lord Stark's unconscious frame.

The curtains were opened, and a healthy breeze filtered into the room, making him shiver.

Despite the chill, the Lord of Winterfell was sweating, shaking slightly and mumbling under his breath. Jon approached the side of the bed and studied his father's stern features. Not so stern anymore. In his sleep, Eddard Stark looked more distressed than serious. The leg in question was wrapped in white gauze, and resting on a feather pillow. Jon observed the injury with morbid curiosity—and the full bottle of Milk of the Poppy—resting on the bedside table.

Jon heard his father mumbling and he knelt at his side.

"Promised…"

He leaned closer.

"Promised… Lyanna… Promised."

Jon recoiled as if slapped.

_Lyanna, a small parchment fit for raven had said, my Queen of Love and Beauty. Tonight._

_Cat does not know and I cannot break my promise, Lord Stark had written. I cannot bear the dreams. She is always whispering to me. Promise me, promise me._

_I cannot break my promise._

Jon stood and left the room. He suddenly felt nauseous. _I will not think these things, _Jon thought furiously. _I will not. I must get the girls to safety. _Outside in the corridor, Sansa stood in her traveling cloak, Jeyne at her side, laden with boxes.
"We must travel light," Jon informed Sansa.

"I know," she replied. "I am."

Jon could only shake his head and took two of the boxes from Jeyne and placed them on the floor outside the girls rooms. Sansa looked ready to argue, but he silenced her with a stern look. Jon caught a fleeting glimpse of himself in the mirror and realized how much he must resembled Lord Stark.

"Fine," Sansa sniffed and looked forlornly at the boxes. "But I will not leave behind the Queen's dresses."

"Very well," Jon agreed. "Can you cover your face and hair?"

Jeyne pulled a black lace scarf from one the boxes and wrapped it around Sansa's head and mouth. Jon nodded his approval.

"How will we exit the Keep, Jon?" Thoros looked down the stairwell and stroked his beard. "I do not think I could find that passage again, in the dark. And I do not wish to become trapped in these walls."

"The front gates are still open, we will ride out," Jon decided. "It is easier to leave a Keep than it is to enter. We've no other choice."

They met Harwin at the base of the Tower, who insisted on joining their company. Together, they made their way to the stables and remained remarkably unbothered until they met the stable master, who refused them entrance until Thoros greased his palm with several coins.

Thoros glanced behind him and gave Jon a meaningful look. The stablemaster, distracted by the coin, did not see the knife that stabbed his side.

Thoros held the man's throat, preventing him from crying out, while Jon quieted Sansa, who had started to cry.

"You didn't have to! Jon!" Sansa protested, and Jon shushed her.

"Sansa, we must leave the Capital," Jon tried to explain, and ushered her inside the stables. "I assure you, it was necessary. Jeyne, take care of her."

Inside the stables, Thoros dragged the man's body behind a stack of hay barrels. It would not remain hidden for long, but it would buy them time. Jon's eyes searched for a suitable mount for himself and Harwin saddled his own horse. After a moment's hesitation, Jon took his father's horse, Night, a bay gelding.

Jon patted Night's flank and steered him towards the stable gates, pleased the horse accepted him as it's temporary rider and eager to leave the Keep. Reaching a hand down, he pulled a red-eyed, unhappy Sansa onto the horse behind him. Harwin took Jeyne, and Thoros appropriated a gentle brown mare. They left through the stable gates and rode for the postern gate, Thoros at their head.

Eight Lannister guards stood between them and salvation. Jon slowed Night to a walk and Thoros unhooded himself with a toothy grin.

"Ah! Daren! A fine night. Clear, cold air from the North, finally. Fancy a stroll through Shadowblack Lane with us?"
Thoros did not let up his horse's pace, they walked calmly under the murder holes of the gate. Jon's heart beat madly against his ribs. Sansa's arms tightened around his chest, making Jon's already shortened breath ragged.

The Lannister guard frowned at the Red Priest. He was a bushy fellow, with a few missing teeth and a scar below his right eye. Streaks of grey colored his golden beard.


Thoros still did not slow his horse, calmly walking through the gate. "Thoros, myself. As you know. And my jolly friends, Sam and Tyron, guards of Winterfell. Off duty themselves, returning these whores to Chataya's, as usual."

Sansa stiffed at the word "whore", but Jon understood Thoros' plan. So, with a twinge of shame, he reached a hand behind him and gently smacked Sansa's arse. To his amusement, Sansa yelped prettily and jumped. Jon let out a crude laugh and tugged on the red braid that had spilled out of her hood and over his shoulder.

"Always liked redheads," Daven commented, turning his attention away from the group and back towards the streets. Jon's horse reached the other side, Sansa's nails now digging angrily into his ribs. Harwin followed and Thoros waved cheerily to the man Daven, wishing him a pleasant night.

"Long live King Robert!"

And then, they were riding in the streets, the Red Keep behind them. Jon felt a weight lift off his shoulders. *Arya and Sansa*, Jon chanted internally, *Arya and Sansa. I have Arya and Sansa.*

At the docks, Jon helped Sansa down from her horse and she quickly slapped him. "Jon Snow!" She snarled, "I am a lady! You deserve that and more. I should have you flogged!"

Harwin dismounted from his horse, Jeyne Poole in tow. The old knight was looking at Jon with a knowing smirk. Jeyne flushed when her feet touched the ground and she rushed to her lady's side. Out of the corner of his eye, Jon spotted Sam and the grubby Arya approaching.

"My deepest apologies, Lady Sansa." Jon bowed low, to appease her anger. "I would never presume to touch my lady again."

"I should think not!" Sansa huffed and turned away from him, grabbing Jeyne Poole's arm.

When Jon turned, Sam was at his side, holding a roll of parchment. Jon noted the missing chest of coins and the small smile on Sam's face. "I've f-found us a cabin, two cabins, on the ship bound for Maidenpool and it's a w-week long journey and the captain's name is Jogos Trios and he wants to talk to the man with the money," Sam said in one quick breath. "Er, that's you, Jon."

"Excellent. Good work, Sam." Jon clapped him on the back.

Sam blushed, "It was mostly little Arya who did the negotiating."

Jon grinned and ruffled his little sister's hair fondly. Turning to Sansa and Jeyne, he introduced Sam and the two ladies curtsied prettily for the son of Randyl Tarly. Sometimes, Jon forgot that Sam was a trueborn son, and himself only a bastard. He'd forgotten the last time a lady curtsied for him. Most of the time, it was Jon doing the bowing and scraping his knees. A strange bitterness filled his mouth, and he quickly explained their plans.
"To Maidenpool," Harwin joined their group and nodded. "And where to then, Jon Snow? So I've word to take to your father when he wakes."

"Riverrun," Jon decided. If he remembered correctly, Robb's army would gather at the Trident. The girls would be safest with their own blood, and Sansa had the Tully look. "Then North to Winterfell."

Harwin gave him a hard, cold look. Jon placed a fist over his heart. "I will guard my sisters with my life, good Harwin."

"Aye..." the guard gave Sam and Thoros a cursory look. "You do that."

Harwin roped together the horses by their bridles and led them back to the gate. Jon watched him go, wondering if he chose the right man to trust. Arya pulled on his arm, pulling him out of his reveries.

"Where's Father?" she asked, in a small tone.

*Promised... Lyanna.*

Jon frowned. "Still not awake, and besides, he cannot leave the city while still Hand of the King."

Arya and Sansa looked unhappy to be leaving without their father, but Jon insisted their departure was part of Lord Stark's wishes. Hopefully, when Lord Stark woke, he would see his daughters were gone and find no more reason to remain in King's Landing. Without Sansa and Arya as prisoners, the Lannister's position in the coming war would weaken considerably.

*Weak enough to let Lord Stark go? Jon hoped. Could Lord Stark warn the king in time? Jon didn't know.*

Sam led them down the dock and towards a large galley. Jon stopped counting after twenty oars. At the head of the ship, a painted bull's head faced the ocean. Jon gripped the hilt of his sword, Sweetsinger, for strength.

"Finally,"—Arya ran up the ramps and forward flipped onto the ship's deck, causing some of the dockworkers to stare—"we're going home!"
Chapter Notes

A/N Yep, I did not update for a while. Let's not talk about it. Instead, let me tell you that this chapter is mostly filler (ugh, I know, that's bad news). I just… really need to get past this chapter and get to the good stuff.

My beta says that some chapters are ice cream and some chapters are vegetables. This may be a vegetable. The next chapter is ice cream.

The captain of the Crosseyed Ox was an amicable man. Originally, Sam and Arya had offered twenty silver for both cabins and another twenty for the captain's silence. But, upon sight of the direwolf, negotiations had to be reopened.

Jogos Trios demanded another fifty silver to board the animal on top of his usual fees, owing to the danger of bringing a wild beast onto the galley. Jon reassured Jogos calmly of his control over the young wolf and bartered the captain down to thirty, and then, when they landed, Jon promised another ten. Jogos wanted forty for the direwolf and — now that Jon'd mentioned it — another forty when the ship landed… and Jon's boots. Jon then offered twenty and twenty, but failed to offer any article of clothing, which insulted Jogos. After an hour of apologies and a rousing card game— wherein Jon somehow managed to regain possession of his boots—the pair eventually settled on thirty-five and thirty-five, and Jon's fancy leather gloves.

Jon had a substantial headache within seconds of boarding the vessel.

After negotiations were complete, Jogos tolerated his Westerosi passengers' presence well enough, but warned Jon to keep Arya and Sansa close.

"My men are a superstitious lot," he growled in a thick, staccato accent Jon could not place. "Keep your women from wandering."

The moment the ship sailed out of Blackwater Bay, Jon felt the tension leave his shoulders. Unfortunately, the ship ran into a late summer storm early in their journey and the Crosseyed Ox was forced to sail close to the coast. Captain Jogo originally intended to cut across open ocean, and he informed Jon that the weather would delay their arrival.

The incident occurred on the second night of their journey.

Unbeknownst to Jon at the time, Sansa woke sometime in the night and stepped around his sleeping body. She woke Jeyne and the slipped above deck to gaze at the stars.

The click of the cabin door opening and shutting quickly roused Jon from his slumber. He blearily blinked his eyes and shook his head, disoriented by the new surroundings.
A feminine voice could be heard saying, "Sea-stars, which are so much brighter than land stars..." before it faded away. Jon rolled onto his feet and took stock of the empty bed.

What is it Arya always says? Jon thought to himself. Stupid Sansa.

He ran out the door and into the single hallway. Minutes later, he found her on deck and cornered uncomfortably between two sailors. Jon could see both men's eyes flickering to Sansa's nightshirt and robe. Jon quickly stepped between them, drawing his sword.

The two men looked at the bare steel and then at Sansa. The younger of the two reached for the thin steel at his side.

"Don't," Jon warned.

"Why not?" said the younger. "Kill you, kill the others in their sleep. Take your gold and your women and your fancy clothes and jewels."

"Simple. I'll kill you," Jon spat. "Do you see this sword? I know how to use it. I've spent the last twelve years using it. I've killed more than my fair share of men. And I'll kill you. And when I'm done, I'll let loose that direwolf in the cage, and he'll kill the rest of you. Stay away. And tell the others to stay away too."

The sailors crossed their arms, but Jon could tell he had shaken the older one. He put a hand on the younger man's arm and pulled him away. Jon waited until they'd disappeared behind the hatch that led to the crew's quarters before turning around.

Once he'd turned around, Sansa clung to his arm. Jon looked down at her Tully red hair. She was tall for her age, but the top of her head still only just reached his chest. Jeyne stood behind her, clutching a silk piece of lace to her chest with eyes closed, whispering something.

A prayer, Jon realized. Ladies pray. It was such an odd realization to make, that there were still faithful people in the world. Jeyne Poole might have been praying in the original timeline, when she was beaten or killed or kept hostage with Sansa.

Suddenly, he felt a great deal better about his decision to take the girls. Even if it meant leaving Lord Stark behind. It was what he would have wanted, Jon reassured himself. Surely, it was what he would have wanted. To see his daughters safe from harm.

"They said such awful things, Jon," Sansa whispered, stirring him from his thoughts. Jon opened his eyes to see Sansa's pale, tear-stricken face. "Why would they say such things?"

Jon paused. "They are not good men," he finally settled on saying.

"They tried to hold me," she confessed, a tear slipping down her cheek. Jon led her towards the door, knowing they should not linger on deck. They reached the girls' cabin and Jon tried to let go of her arm, but Sansa would not relinquish her vice grip. Jon wasn't even certain she knew to whom she clung. Her eyes were wide with horror as she whispered, "I pushed them away, but they only laughed."

Jon grabbed her shoulders and made her look at him. For an instant, he saw the old Sansa return. The frightened child was back. Staring up at him. Asking him to be a big brother. It reminded Jon of when Sansa was only toddler, too young to know anything of the world.

"Never go anywhere alone on this ship, Sansa. Never. Take me with you. You can always wake me no matter what time of day. You can even ask Sam or Thoros if you don't want me. But never
Sansa nodded fervently and curled into a ball on the bed she shared with Jeyne and Arya. Jon fell asleep against the cabin door, cursing his luck and the Silver Prince. He dreamt of snow and cold winds, and when he woke the next morning, he was disoriented and confused to find himself asleep in the hallway with his sword clutched to his chest.

Sansa paid heed to his words and never left the cabin alone again. She occasionally asked Jon to accompany her above deck and their walks were silent but not uncomfortable. The air between them lacked the unbearable tension that was ever-present during their previous encounters in King's Landing, and before, in Winterfell. Sansa would likely never forgive him for being a bastard, but it seemed she forgave him for ripping her away from her golden prince.

Jon was content to leave the matter alone for the sake of peace between them. The journey was far from over and a long road lay ahead. Jon had unofficially been appointed the leader of their group and he needed everyone's cooperation. Luckily for him, most of the group was friendly to one another.

Arya trailed after Thoros like a lost puppy, begging to see his flaming sword, or hear yet another story from the far east or the Jade Sea. Sansa and Jeyne avoided the red priest, but were always polite at shared meals. Sansa was a fervent believer in the Seven and the Red Priest's open devotion made her uneasy. She ignored Thoros, and favored Sam with questions about the Reach.

When Arya wasn't with Thoros, she was with Jon begging for a sparring session. Jon acquiesced only after it became apparent that her badgering would not cease.

"Alright," he finally said one morning, after breakfast. "But only if you promise. Not a word to your mother. She'd hang me for this."

"I promise! I promise!"

And so Jon taught her the various footworks he knew, and Arya mixed it with her strange, foreign style of fighting. Jon even took to Water Dancing, mimicking what little knowledge the legendary Syrio Forel had imparted to Arya.

Sometimes Sam appeared on the deck to watch their bouts and shout encouragements. Jon even tried to teach Sam a thing or two about fighting, hoping to ward off the other boy's ridicule when his friend finally arrived at the Watch, but Sam was—as always—hopeless with the sword.

All in all, they were an unusual company. A lady, a bastard, a red priest, a lord's son, a steward's daughter, and a water dancer (as Arya called herself), all fleeing from the Capitol.

Jon enjoyed the time before dusk most of all. On balmy evenings, when the light from the setting sun was just right, the old knight wove tales both horrifying and fantastical. Stories told over towering flames. Flames too tall and too red to be natural.

These tales were enticing enough to draw Arya, Sam, Jon, Sansa and Jeyne out from their rooms and onto the deck. Sometimes, Jon saw small, writhing figures fighting in the flames.

At least, Jon thought he saw them. Arya did too. Sam didn't. Sansa thought they were all mad. Jeyne thought it was a cruel joke.

Late one night, after the girls had gone to bed, and Jon set Ghost to watch their door, Thoros begged a private audience. That night, he told a tale for only Jon's ears. He told the tale of Azor Ahai. The prophecy of the Prince that Was Promised. The forging of lightbringer and the song of ice and fire.
Legends of an age past.

Jon lay awake for far too long that night, unable to stop his brain from thinking of the Silver Prince. *Fire and Ice, Ice and Fire*, he tossed and turned on the uncomfortable wooden floor. *When the cold breath of darkness falls upon the world*, Jon thought. *The Others. A burning sword. Stannis. The Wall. Why was I sent back? What can I change? What can one man do?*

"The time is drawing slowly closer," Thoros had said as he drew his story to a close. "Trust in the One True God, Jon."

But Jon did not trust anymore. He certainly could not trust Thoros' Red God. He could not trust anyone. Not completely. And he could not sleep with these thoughts. He stared restlessly out the small window of the cabin, thinking. *Lyanna and the Silver Prince and Lord Stark.* How could he trust anymore?

Thinking of his lord father reminded Jon of the promise he made to Lord Varys, and he realized that he'd broken his word. In the end, he had been unable to remove Lord Stark from the city. Jon had no choice but to leave Lord Stark to fend off the lions alone. He hoped the Master of Whispers would understand that Arya and Sansa's safety—and preventing their awful fates—was Jon's sole responsibility.

He would not stray from his duty.

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By the end of their adventure by sea, Jon's back and neck ached from sleeping on the floor of the girls' cabin.

It took a week and a half to reach Maidenpool. The ship docked in the middle of the night, and Jon left the vessel first, covered by a large hood, to rent a room from the local inn. He stopped at several establishments before deciding on a lesser known tavern at the far end of town. It was dark and rainy when the rest of the party disembarked. Jon was silently thankful for the gloomy weather, which would make it more difficult for a stranger to identify their faces.

Their quarters were cramped but livable. Sansa and Jeyne weren't happy with the arrangements (seeing as they shared a large room with three men and Arya "horseface"), but Jon convinced them it was best to conserve what gold they had for the unforeseeable future.

Jon wanted to leave Maidenpool as soon as possible. He would not feel safe until they were behind the stone walls of Riverrun or inside the keep at Winterfell.

The next morning, after they had all rested, Jon, Thoros, Sam and Arya left the inn in disguise to gather news and find a new means to travel the roads or the sea. Jon could not convince Arya to stay behind, so he chopped her hair and smeared some mud on her face, which suited Arya just fine.

Half a day later, Jon thought they'd run out of luck. The people were afraid to travel, and tightlipped with strangers. It was Sam and Arya who found a fishing boat that'd take them all the way to the Saltpans. Jon hired the boat immediately, eager to depart as soon as possible. After the boat ran aground further into the Bay of Crabs, they would travel the western road towards Riverrun. When they arrived, Jon would hand over the care of his sisters to the girls' Uncle and Grandfather. House Tully was one of the most powerful houses in Westeros. With the command of the Riverlands, the girls would be safe. Jon was certain.

Confident in his new plan, Jon bade everyone return to the inn to eat their fill.

Jon sat with Arya on one side and Jeyne on the other. Sansa looked miserable sitting between Thoros.
and Sam. The plates on the table had been cleared and the ale drunk. Jon was just contemplating the bed upstairs when he heard two men talking in low tones.

"... scuffle 'tween the Hand's men…"

Jon sat up straight.

"... with Robert gone…"

Thoros and he exchanged looks. Together, they stood and approached the men from behind.

"What've you heard," Jon asked the drunk dockworker. "We've got to travel. To see family. Need to know if the roads are safe. Buy you an ale for news."

"Oh aye, aye…Like I say," the talkative man slurred, "the King fell ill. Supposed to leave for a hunt but never made it past the gate. Some say he was poisoned. Most say, by the Queen, but who's there to question her now?"

"The King is ill?" Jon reiterated.

"Nay. Listen. The King is dead. And the Hand's men? Murdered in the streets. The poor folk are calling it the "Howling Riot" because of the way the common folk got to howling and striking the Gold Cloaks while the Hand was fleeing the Capital. Queen says Lord Stark's a traitor. Crimes against the crown, but won't say what crimes. Word around the pub is that the Prince's not a Prince at all, but a bastard by the Queen's own brother. Disgusting," he spat, "man can't fuck his own sister. The Seven say it ain't right."

Jon didn't know if these things had happened in the previous timeline. He did not recognize these events, but the Watch was so far removed from the rest of the Kingdoms. Who could tell the past from the present from the previous past? Jon did not know.

"The Hand?" Jon prompted the man to elaborate. His heart hammered in his chest.

"Ain't no one seen heads or tails of Stark since. Some say he died with his guard. Others say he made it to the Kingswood, but the Lannister's chased him down. There's a price on his head."

"Know what I'd do with all that gold? Buy me a whore for every day of the fuckin' week!" the man to his right said, weaving back and forth in his seat. "No! Five whores—seven! Ah, how many days in a week?"

"Ha! Seven, Thom, Seven. And maybe the reward's been collected, maybe not. Alls anyone can agree is that the Hand's face was bleeding during the riot. Blood was drawn," the dockworker growled.

Jon's heart sank. *Missing, but last seen bleeding.* Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Arya and Sansa sitting rigidly in their seats.

"Thank you…" Jon said halfheartedly, "... for the news."

"Long live King Joffrey," the worker said and spat on the ground once more.

Sansa looked shocked. Arya looked the same, until she began to rage and Jon had to throw her over his shoulder and lug her up the stairs. Once behind doors, she beat her fists against his chest and cried. "It's not fair, it's not fair. I hate the King! I hate the Queen! I hate the Prince!" Jon could only hold her until her fit passed and she fell asleep.
Arya's breathing was deep and steady by the time Jon left to find Thoros and Sam in the common room. Both men sat huddled in a dark corner, swathed under cloaks. Sansa and Jeyne had retired to their shared bed.

"Your brother, Robb, has called his banners. The Northmen will march down the Neck," Thoros whispered in Jon's ear. "Jaime Lannister is gathering men at the Golden Tooth."

The war has begun in earnest, he thought. Underneath the table, his hands were sweaty. Jon's heart, which had felt calm while holding Arya, suddenly beat frantically against his ribs. He forced himself to steady his breath.

"You seem calm."

Jon looked away. "You're mad, I am losing my mind."

"Calm enough for a man who just learned his father might have bled to death in a sewer."

"N-now… enough of that, Ser Thoros," Sam came to his rescue. "Leave Jon be."

"I…" Jon started and then stopped. He couldn't trust himself to speak of his father. The father who raised him and sheltered him. The father he idolized in death. The noble, generous Lord Stark. Lord Stark, who subjected him to his wife's anger, who bowed to the will of King Robert. Who lied to him? Who abused his trust when Jon came to him with evidence? No, he would not speak of Lord Stark. Instead, he cleared his throat and asked, "Is it safe to travel to Riverrun?"

I said that? Jon could not remember, but he nodded in agreement. It must have been the night of the Hand's Tourney, when he'd been inebriated with Thoros and Sam.

"The Tully's are in Riverrun," Jon said. "We must get to the castle before it is besieged, by whatever means necessary."

"As you say," Thoros agreed. "I will look in the fire and ask God for guidance."

One thing was certain, the girls could not remain in Maidenpool. Sansa and Thoros were too recognizable due to their distinctive coloring, and Ghost was also a silent issue. The direwolf had sprinted off the galley and into the woods as soon as they'd docked and Jon hadn't seen him since. It was only a matter of time before the beast came sniffing around town, looking for his master.

Jon lay down to sleep on the floor that night and dreamt of Ghost.

More specifically, he dreamt he was Ghost. He hadn't warged in months. Not since his previous life. He was running through the forest, hot on the heels of a roan colored stag. He could smell the animal's fear and sense the impending kill. Jon leapt and sank his teeth into the deer's flank, tasting blood. The animal let out an unnatural scream as he dragged it down to the ground. Once it was dead, he buried his snout in the corpse, ripping flesh and tendon.

A noise and a familiar smell drew his eyes to the woods. Golden eyes watched from the sidelines. Sister, he ran to her side. All four paws leapt into the air with one thought: Nymeria. Jon woke with a start.

The next day it rained. The fisherman was hesitant to travel, but together Jon and Sam persuaded him
to leave early that afternoon after the worst of the rain subsided.

The fisherman had heard of Thoros' flaming sword and surprisingly, Jon Sand, the bastard who competed in the Hand's Tourney. They eventually agreed on the condition that Jon would deposit a small fee now, and the full purse would be due once they docked at the Saltbaks, with the stipulation that Jon and Thoros would defend the vessel should they run across bandits or other outlaws along the coast.

Jon handed over the coin. Along the way, he hoped to catch game, or hunt as Ghost in order to provide food. They'd be unable to purchase many supplies for the journey. He needed to get Arya and Sansa to their Uncle and Grandfather, and fast. *In the stories, a rescue does not make a man a pauper,* he thought bitterly.

The fishing boat was thin but long, and made of a pale-colored wood. It was manned by the old man, his two sons, and one daughter. Sansa and Jeyne sat at the front of the boat, far away from the smelly catch. Jon and Thoros helped the sons tie the sails, Sam assisted in navigation, and the daughter rowed on occasion. The father leaned back against the helm and shouted commands.

The fisherman estimated it'd take them two weeks to reach the Saltbaks. Even though Jon was frustrated at the slow pace of the boat, and anxious to reach Riverrun, he thanked the fisherman's family kindly and helped shoulder their packs when they stopped to dock the boat against the shore at dusk.

The first night, they camped on the sandy shores of a beach. The daughter caught crab and boiled them over the fire with saltwater. They had grapes, sweet potatoes, and some honeyed bread the fisherman's wife had baked. Jon had never tasted crab, and found he liked it well enough. Thoros refused, claiming he'd swell like a pufferfish if he ever touched the meat. Sam laughed at the image, but the knight was deadly serious and did not appreciate the jape.

That night, Thoros joined Jon by the fire after the others had fallen asleep. It was a custom they shared ever since their time at the Painted Lady. Jon no longer looked for the shadow of the dragon's wing, having long given up on seeing it again. Instead, he sat and worried. He worried about the money. He worried about the girls and the wolves. He worried about his father and his brothers. And finally, he worried the monstrous Lord Bolton and the Queen Regent.

"It's to be war," Thoros said, after a long moment of silence. "I had hoped never to see war again. Foolish, really."

The red of the fire reflected in the knight's eyes, giving him a demonic appearance. Jon might have been frightened if he didn't know the man so well.

"As had I," Jon said.

*War.* Jon thought of the Battle for the Wall, and the sweep of Stannis' army. The cries from the wildlings at night and the dead corpses of Thenns and the ice-river clans. He remembered giants crawling under the wall, and lowering his torch to burn the dead bodies of his black brethren. Last, he thought of Ygritte and the shaft of a black arrow sticking out of her chest.

"Goodnight, Ser Thoros."

Thoros crinkled his white brow and Jon bid him a goodnight. He could not speak, choked by the loss of Ygritte. He dreamt only of her. Her hair. Her smell. The sound of her voice. The warmth of her body as they found shelter in one another.
When he woke, he lay with his eyes closed, wishing away the memories. Thoros shook his shoulder and Jon was on his feet. The second day, the wind favored their small vessel and the Saltpans grew ever closer.

Days blurred together. At night they camped under the stars. The Bay of Crabs and the Saltpans were in the midst of a drought, so they'd no fear of rain, though fresh water was difficult to find. Fortunately, the fisherman and his sons had traveled this length many times, and knew all the little rivers and creeks close to shore. Sam, due to his extensive hours of study, was also well versed in the geography and history of the land, and he entertained Lady Sansa and Jeyne for many hours with stories of the river kings. On the days when there was nothing to do but row and sweat, Sam's stories and songs were a light-hearted distraction.

The fifth day, Jon spotted a white blur on the horizon. They made camp hours later, on an outcropping of land with sparse trees. Jon warned the fisherman of Ghost's presence, but the man didn't seem to truly believe him until Arya spotted golden eyes in the brush.

"Ghost, to me," Jon whistled and the direwolf took three steps forward and into the light.

The fisherman yelled and his sons drew their knives. Sam calmed them with a few words and they put away their weapons after witnessing the beast roll on it's back before Jon.

"Ah, Ghost," Jon rubbed him down with a few leaves. His hands came away covered in mud, pine needles and burs. "Where have you been lately?"

The direwolf nuded his hands and then twisted onto it's feet. Ghost danced before Arya.

"I had a dream," Jon recalled. "I saw Nymeria."

Arya's eyes lit with joy. "I did too!" Arya bounced over to Ghost. "Only I was Nymeria. Do you think she's nearby? Do you think she'll come back, after I told her to stay away?"

Ghost disappeared back into the brush. Arya looked disappointed. The beach and the surrounding woods were quiet around them. Jon placed a comforting hand on Arya's shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

Moments later, Ghost returned with a large, grey, female direwolf, who did not hesitate to tackle Arya to the ground. Sansa leapt to her feet and shrieked, and Jon pulled the wolf away, only to find Arya cackling madly and clutching the direwolf's fur. "Nymeria, Nymeria, I knew you wouldn't hate me. I knew you'd understand."

Arya and the wolf were inseparable that night, hugging each other closely near the fire. Jon observed Arya's contented smile in her sleep. Ghost was less affectionate. After greeting Jon, the white wolf decided to sprawl out in the far away grass, dead asleep.

"I thought she was dead," Sansa whispered, to his right.

Jon turned to meet her eyes. Sansa was laying next to Jeyne, as per usual, her arms around her friend's middle.

"When the cold wind blows the lone wolf dies but the pack survives," Jon quoted. "The cold winds are not blowing tonight. It seems Nymeria survived."

"Lady didn't," she whispered and lowered her gaze, "and she wasn't alone."

Jon didn't know what to say.
"You look like him," Sansa spoke again, after an awkward silence.

Jon knew of whom she was referring. Again, he had nothing to say.

"I suppose it's not your fault," she said slowly. "I can't help that I only look like mother."

There was forgiveness in her tone. Jon locked gazes with his half-sister and smiled. "Get some sleep, sweet sister, I'll watch over us."

Jon had not called her sister in years, but she did not correct him. After Jon put out the fire, he turned to check on her and found her asleep, curled around Jeyne Poole protectively.

Another week passed. Jon and Jeyne both suffered from the ill effects of the sun. The fisherman took pity on them, and allowed Jon and Jeyne to rest under the boat's canopy for two days. Sam—and occasionally Sansa—brought them water and food.

On the night before they arrived at the Saltpans, Jon volunteered to keep watch and thought of the road ahead. Navigating the Riverlands would be a difficult task, but it had to be done. Jon and Thoros agreed it would be best to exercise every caution. The wolves would scout the path, and the company would follow slowly. Jon only hoped the direwolves were as intelligent as he'd hoped.

Arya and Sansa, Jon reminded himself. I must protect Arya and Sansa.

Sam was snoring when Jon woke him for his watch. "Wh—the pastries—not turtle soup," he blinked at Jon's face. "Ah, Jon," he wiped the sleep from his eyes. "Sorry."

Jon lay down on his mat and Sam took a seat on the fallen log, facing the darkness.

Jon casually rested his head on his arm. Ghost came to lay against his side. Nymeria had trouble staying in one place, and would often disappear for hours at a time. Ghost sometimes followed, but always returned within the day.

"It's been silent all night," Jon said.

"Has it?" Sam replied in a tremulous voice. "That's good."

"Don't be afraid. Ghost will hear anything before we see it, and by the time it gets here we'll be long gone down the river."

"Of course, Jon," Sam shifted uncomfortably on the log and rubbed his backside. "Not used to all these adventures. I suppose we got into plenty at the Wall."

Jon smiled up at the stars. "Aye, we did."

"Any worth mentioning?"

"You slayed an Other," Jon said slowly. "They called you Sam the Slayer."

"You're joking." When Jon didn't say anything Sam kicked his foot, "You're joking, aren't you? A jest."

"Do you doubt it?" Jon rose on his elbows and smirked, "You fought your way back from Craster's Keep with a wildling woman and her babe as company. The Other tried to take her baby and you stabbed it in the back with a dragonglass dagger."

"Dragonglass?" Sam's eyes grew wide and then he shook his head. "Noo, that doesn't sound like
"It was you. It is you," Jon insisted and then thinking back on those days, he winked. "The wildling girl thanked you right proper."

"Wh-what are you implying?" Sam stammered and blushed.

"That Samwell Tarly wet his wick with a pretty girl. He was the envy of the Night's Watch, as I recall," Jon was enjoying teasing his friend, he had too many duties and responsibilities as the Lord Commander to delve into Sam's and Gilly's relationship at the time, but he was certain at one point, it had happened. "You made eyes at each other, and I'd always catch you reading in the Maester's library. Her hand on yours. Never saw the other hand, but I suppose you knew where it was-"

"Jon!" Sam kicked him again and Jon laughed.

"It's true!"

"I don't believe you…" Sam grumbled and Jon turned away, for once, content to fall asleep without gazing into the fire. "Don't believe you…"

Minutes later. "What was her name again?"

"Gilly," Jon smiled but did not open his eyes, "she had brown, doe-eyes. A slender thing. You called her brave and kind."

"What about her hair?"

"Dark brown. Curly."

"Ah… like my mother…" Samwell trailed off. "Gilly… named for the flower…"

Jon fell asleep to Sam's murmurs of "Gilly… Gilly…" and he did not dream. Not even of the Wall.
An unknown number of days later…

Jon stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his chin facing forward, his mind devoid of all thoughts. It was an old, familiar position he used to adopt whenever Ser Alliser fancied playing "harass the bastard".

"What happened after the fisherman's boat landed in the Saltpans?"

Jon fought the urge to lower his eyes. It was an old instinct, one he thought he'd extinguished many years ago, when Mance Rayder raised him up from his knees. He stood in the Blackfish's private solar, a small, comfortable study with a large set of windows facing the Trident.

It was clear to him that Lady Catelyn and her uncle, the Blackfish, both struggled to trust his word—the word of a bastard—even though his story had been verified time and again by both Arya and Lady Sansa.

Upon their arrival, Jon and his party had been received by the Blackfish, Lady Catelyn, and Edmure Tully. It was a joyful reunion for Arya and Sansa, whose mother had not hesitated to clutch them tightly and cry for joy. Both the Stark daughters had been assumed either dead, or taken prisoner by the newly crowned King Joffrey.

All of Lady Catelyn's smiles had died when she set sight on Jon. She demanded he be taken from her sight and placed under guard. At first, Jon was confused, and then it became clear that she blamed him for Lord Stark's death.

Jon could not even let his grief show.

Arya had argued vehemently on Jon's behalf, but it hardly did any good. Even Sansa had risen meekly to his defense during their mother's long, hateful diatribe, but Catelyn would hear none of it. Jon had been sent to await questioning and that was the last he saw of the girls, or Thoros, or Sam.

Sweat stung his eyes and plastered his hair to his forehead as he stood stiffly in the center of the room. He felt disgusting. He was covered in mud. He hadn't bathed in days.

"From the Saltpans we received news of Lord Stark's… death…"
Jon remembered that hazy afternoon. He'd just settled the girls into the merchant's house. The inn had been full and Jeyne's skin still blistered from the sun. Jon had paid the merchant five copper for a room in his household, and another three for their meals. The merchant had taken the coin greedily, and traded news with a loose tongue. That was when Jon had heard, for the second time in his life, that his father had died.

Jon had known, but he hadn't known for certain. He'd chosen the girls. He'd chosen to save his sisters over his own father, and he would live with that decision.

Kill the boy.

"... and the siege of Riverrun. We remained in the Saltpans for as long as it was safe. But news of Stone Hedge made us eager to move. Saltpans was the next likely target for Gregor Clegane's burning lance across the countryside."

"And yet, you entered the Riverlands anyway, regardless of the danger to my daughters," Lady Catelyn snapped.

"Robb's—"

"Lord Robb."

Jon bit back a sigh. In the distance, outside the windows, Jon could see the waters of the Trident. He had the strongest urge to jump into the waters and let the river wash him away. At least then, he might be clean.

"By then, Lord Robb's army had marched on the Trident. Beric Dondarrion's forces were battling the Mountain's in the Southwest. After the Battle of the Whispering Woods, Lord Robb moved to secure Riverrun. The Mountain's—and Lord Dondarrion's—forces were scattered. I sent the direwolves to scout the safest—"

"You sent the direwolves. Savage beasts who don't know east from west!" Lady Catelyn's sneer was not attractive.

*I have not been treated thus since I was a mere initiate.*

Jon remained silent. Anything he said would only compound her anger. Jon had been in this position before. It was always Jon's fault. Bran fell and hurt his arm. Jon's fault for taking him to town. Robb got a black eye. Jon was too rough in practice. Arya was muddy and unkempt. Jon's fault for being a poor influence. Lady Catelyn never sought him out. In fact, she avoided him at all cost, but when he attracted her attention he always seemed to attract her wrath in turn.

In another life, if he had had another man's blood, she might have been kind to him, like she was to all others. But I am not of another man's blood. Jon head felt fuzzy, his mouth dry. The boy is dead and Jon was always buzzing just beyond her reach. A bug she could not squash.

The Blackfish observed the interaction between lady and bastard with careful eyes. Jon waited. When it seemed she would say no more, he continued.

"On the fourth day, our party encountered several men from Beric Dondarrion's and Lord Stark's retinues. Harwin spoke for us—"

"The soldier from Lord Stark's personal guard? Who helped you secret Ladies Arya and Sansa away from the Tower of the Hand?"
It was the first time the Blackfish addressed him directly. Brynden Tully had a full, greying beard and his niece's crystal blue eyes. His personal coat of arms was emblazoned proudly across his chest, over a length of the finest chainmail Jon had ever seen, and his tunic was tied by a chain of silver fish.

The Blackfish regarded Jon with suspicion and mild curiosity, but showed no signs of the severity his niece displayed. While Lady Catelyn stood, the Blackfish preferred to sit in his brother's oakwood seat, one hand casually strumming it's arm.

"Yes, Ser. A loyal and good man named Harwin. We exchanged news. Of the twenty Winterfell guards Lord Stark sent to pursue the Mountain, only six remained. They knew me and the girls from Winterfell. Lord Dondarrion—"

"Beric Dondarrion is dead,"—Brynden Tully's fingers ceased their strumming—"impaled by Gregor Clegane's lance. However," he said and held up a hand to Lady Catelyn when she looked as if to interrupt once more, "I have heard reports of Dondarrion and his band of ragged fellows, raiding Lannister foraging parties and creating general chaos for our enemy. So there may be stock in these rumors."

The Blackfish nodded for him to continue, and Jon searched for the words to describe his time with the Brotherhood.

He neglected to mention the kiss of the Red God which resurrected Lord Dondarrion.

When Jon and his company had stumbled upon the Brotherhood, the lord had been suffering for a day and a half. Dondarrion had lain on a cot, feverish and struggling for breath. Death came for his soul… and Thoros had shepherded it back with a whispered chant and the briefest of kisses.

Jon should have been shocked. He should have been appalled or he should have been joyful, but nothing surprised him these days, not even miracles. After all, hadn't his own soul returned from the afterlife?

Sam's reaction had been perhaps the most understandable. The bookish son of a lord had fainted outright and when he woke, he had followed Thoros around with a leather bound journal and charcoal pencil, feverishly recording his every word.

"Lord Dondarrion and I were prior acquaintances from the Hand's Tourney," Jon said to the Blackfish. "He gave us food and safe passage through the Riverlands up to the Red Fork."

"A good man." Brynden Tully stroked the edge of his mustaches, over a fine white scar. Jon wondered if there was a connection between Dondarrion and that scar. "An honorable man. Why has he not entered Riverrun? He last served Lord Stark. Would he not endeavor to serve his son, the new Warden of the North?"

"I was not privy to the lord's plans."

Dondarrion had been pleased to see him, a little too pleased. Since returning from the dead, the Stormlord watched him closely. During the day, he'd felt the lord's eyes on the back of his head. Watching, watching, always watching.

Jon wished he knew what secret words Dondarrion and Thoros had exchanged over their midnight ale, when the fire grew dim. Was it the same conversation Jon and Thoros had shared many times
A great many of the soldiers that had once followed Robert Baratheon and Lord Stark now followed Dondarrion and the religion of the Red God. The resurrection was treated as a holy sign of providence. It was unsettling. Jon had withdrawn to Sam and Arya's company for the rest of the journey to Riverrun. If Thoros had noticed his change in preference, he had not questioned it.

They'd traveled with the Brotherhood Without Banners for nearly a month, waiting patiently for the best time to approach Riverrun. Ghost and Nymeria's warnings of approaching soldiers had proven to be invaluable to the Brotherhood, and Jon's sisters benefited from the extra guard. It was an advantageous arrangement, but Jon was eager to get the girls to their mother's ancestral home.

"When you left the Capitol, was Lord Stark alive?"

Jon's thoughts were jolted back to the present. Lady Stark's eyes were burning brightly. Jon recalled his last conversation with Lord Stark, and his painful goodbye in the dark of the chambers. Jon's throat closed of its own volition. He could not speak.

"Cat," said the Blackfish as he closed his eyes.

"He was unconscious from the blow the Kingslayer struck," Jon said raspily, finding his voice. "Lord Stark instructed me—"

"What about my instructions?" Lady Stark said darkly. "I brought you to the city to guard him! To keep him safe! You should have been there!"

Jon opened his mouth to reply, but realized it was useless. Nothing he said would redeem himself in the Lady's eyes. With a sigh, he resigned himself to her words, allowing them to sink and wallow in the dark depths of his heart. The place where her words festered and scarred. A place where all she ever said to him, all those hateful words, all those silent rejections, still remained.

"Why did I leave you there? You're useless! Your father died there. You should have died too! Why don't you die?!"

Catelyn sobbed once, painfully, and turned away to face the window, effectively blocking Jon's only reprieve. At the sound of her broken sobs, he felt a twinge of sympathy. Her husband, her love, was gone. Never to return again. Jon remembered Ygritte's death, how he had secreted away her body. He dragged her North to burn. Away from the others, away from the battle. In the cold clear snow, the salt of his tears had stung the still healing abrasions on his cheeks. He wanted someone to blame then too, but he had had no one but himself and the creeping cold of winter.

"What were Lord Stark's instructions?" Ser Brynden's voice shook him out of his reveries.

"Take his daughters to safety," Jon said softly. The Blackfish nodded.

"Get out," Lady Stark choked.

Jon bowed and exited the solar swiftly.

A stocky, grey-haired woman escorted him to his temporary chambers. Jon didn't ask her name.

Riverrun was ancient and beautiful. Portraits of the previous Lord Tullys and the carved busts of the...
River Kings lined the halls leading to and from its various halls. Red and blue streaming flags with fish emblems blanketed the causeways and tapestries from ages past drifted in a light northeasterly wind. The elderly woman escorted him down several winding staircases before she stopped in front of a worn, brown door. The accommodations were poor, but more than adequate for a bastard. He longed for a bath, but when he turned, the woman was gone.

In the privacy of his new chambers, Jon undressed and splashed water over his arms and face, seeking relief. It was colder in Riverrun than in the Capital, but still too damned warm. He wondered what Robb was doing and why he hadn't been present for Jon's interrogation. Would his brother be happy to see him? Or would he too blame Jon for Lord Stark's death?

Robb and Jon had shared a heartfelt goodbye many months ago, when Jon left Winterfell with Lady Catelyn. Jon recalled thinking it wasn't as satisfactory as he remembered. Robb had assumed Jon would return to Winterfell, and wished him a safe journey. The acting lord of Winterfell had told him to hurry back.

*What do you want?* Jon thought bitterly. *He's a lord now. Soon to be a King. Kings can't be seen with their bastard brothers.*

Part of him had hoped Robb would be different.

A knock sounded at the door and Jon dried himself quickly before throwing on his travel stained shirt. The door opened to reveal Sam, Ghost sniffing at his hands, and the red-clad Thoros.

"Care to join us in a celebratory drink?" Thoros held up several wine glasses and a bottle of dark liquid.

Hours later, the sun had set and Jon found himself in the large common hall of Riverrun. The hall was built out of dark grey brick, with carved stone pillars and wide wooden rafters. Five large hearth fires had been lit sometime in the night, and Thoros gravitated towards the last one. *The one with the tallest flames,* Jon thought, amused.

Jon sat first. Thoros and Sam sat on his right and left side, respectively. They passed the bottle back and forth, neglecting the glasses completely. Jon leaned back on the heavy wooden bench and allowed the tension in his shoulders to ease. After so many nights on the run from the Mountain's men… it was a safe feeling to be surrounded by four solid walls.

"Jon?" Sam's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Aye, Sam."

"I've been thinking… Well, I've had a very good time… these last several eh-hem weeks—months."

"Ah, I'm glad. Me too." Jon wondered what Sam was thinking about.

"And I thank you, for telling me about Gilly, and all the adventures. I never thought I'd go on an adventure and—It was fun and all, don't get me wrong—loads of fun!"

"We've spent the last fourteen days running for our lives and stealing food," Jon said. "Whatever you've got to say, Sam, don't coat it in honey. Not for me."

Sam paused and twiddled his thumbs. "I think I should leave for the Wall."

Jon inhaled painfully. So this was it. Sam was choosing to leave him. Jon should have expected it sooner. Sam was a man of his word and it was bound to happen eventually. Still, Jon couldn't help
but feel trapped. Sam was a true friend, honest and loyal and kind, and Jon didn't like the sort of man he was without Sam around, the choices he made. Would the disaster at the Wall have been avoided if he had kept Sam closer?

"You're a free man, Samwell Tarly. You go where you choose," Jon replied, nodding his head. "I understand you want to keep your word."

"I'm sorry..." Sam muttered and hung his head. "I'm likely only good for sweeping the floors and writing letters, but if my father finds out what I've done... I'm dead. He said so himself. He'll kill me and I don't want to die. I must take the black."

Jon put a hand on his shoulder. "I understand, Sam. Believe me, I understand better than most. Help me with one last thing before you leave?"

Sam bobbed his head. "Of course, you're my friend."

Jon could not describe the warm feeling that washed over him at those words. *I'm your friend. Sam said it so simply. Jon wished he could convey his feelings so easily, with such ease and authenticity."

"The Tully's have a library here, aye? I need books. Books on... " Jon paused and looked left and right. Only Thoros' drunken stare was watching. "... dragons," Jon whispered.

"Dragons?!

Jon fixed him with a look. Sam blushed.

"History. Habits. Legend. Whatever you can find. I need this information for the future." Jon lowered his voice. Sam and Thoros leaned in to catch his words. "Dragonfire would be the most effective way to combat the encroaching army of Others. And while you're at Castle Black, Sam, I know there are books there with information on dragonglass and the Children. Find them. Read them. Memorize them. We need to gain the advantage early, or else we are all doomed. Do you understand?"

Sam eyes got wider and wider and he swallowed visibly at the end of Jon's speech. "Will it be dangerous?"

"More dangerous than any other war ever fought," Thoros chimed in before Jon could reply. "The Long Night is coming, Samwell Tarly, and Jon Snow is going to stop it."

Jon shook his head. Thoros always said such strange things, and with growing frequency. Jon knew he needed to talk to the red priest seriously about these claims, but they hadn't had a moment alone. The Brotherhood had always been present.

"Enough of that, Thoros. We are all going to stop the Others. Together. With dragonfire, and dragonglass, and good steel. We're going to fight for the side that fights for the living."

Sam grew paler. "Perhaps going to the Wall isn't such a grand idea."

"You'll be fine, Sam," Jon reassured him. "You'll meet Gilly soon and maybe the Lord Commander will send you to get your Maester's chains. And one day soon, I'll be joining you."

Sam's face relaxed in relief, but his eyes were troubled. Thoros gave Jon an indecipherable look and stood, abandoning their company to stalk closer to the fire.

Jon contemplated the red priest's silent figure before turning back to his black brother.
Jon and Sam talked into the night. They ate and drank, and Jon confided in Sam more about his plan to appeal to the Mother of Dragons. Sam already held some rudimentary knowledge of the Targaryen lineage and dragon lore, and he gladly answered some of Jon's questions. Unfortunately, most of Sam's know-how revolved around legends of magic horns and mystical enchantments.

In the midst of Sam's tangent regarding Valyrian magic, the son of Tarly began to yawn.

Jon clapped Sam on the back and reaffirmed that he was making the right decision to uphold his vow and join the Night's Watch. Sam promised to linger at Riverrun just long enough to assist Jon with his research on dragons and then the soon-to-be-black-brother retired for the night. Jon watched him leave with a heavy heart.

The hour was close to midnight now, and only a few men loitered in the halls. Jon recognized the Bolton and Karstark sigils, but he knew none of the remaining men. Whenever lords had come to visit Winterfell, Jon had often been hidden away. He was Ned Stark's greatest shame, and bastards did not eat at lord's tables.

Jon's eyes found Thoros' brooding figure. The red priest remained, as Jon had last glanced him, frozen in front of the large hearth, still as a statue. Dark shadows twisted and danced along the stone floor and while the other fires in the hall had begun to dim, Thoros' did not. His red garments glowed with unnatural magic.

Jon was momentarily struck dumb, but when the enchantment passed he felt a surge of annoyance. The image was a painful reminder of Melisandre and her nightly vigils.

*Am I foolish to trust this man?* Jon thought, clenching his fists to his side. *So different. So much warmer. So much kinder. But in some ways, too similar to that woman and her witchcraft.*

*The night is dark and full of terrors.* The priestess' sultry voice drifted forth from the recesses of his memory.

The same chant, night after night, and always just outside his window. Jon thought he'd go mad the first night. Jon thought he'd kill her within the week. Did she do it to antagonize him, the green Commander of the Night's Watch? The constant staring, the blatant disregard for his authority, the prophetic turns of phrases she'd lay at his feet and then leave for him to puzzle over.

*Is Ser Thoros so different?* Jon wondered. *He swore himself to me. He swore himself to Jon Snow. Not Commander Snow, not Lord Snow, but Jon Snow. A bastard.*

"Ser Thoros…" Jon began, and he took a steadying breath to continue.

"JON!"

Jon's thoughts flew out of his mind. Robb's voice had startled him, and he dropped his outstretched hand.

"Robb."

Robb embraced him warmly. Jon was transported back, years ago, to when he first departed for the Wall. The last time he'd ever held his brother, the familiar masculine smell, the overwhelming sense of security and family and brotherhood. Jon returned the embrace and they broke apart gruffly, as if to distance themselves from the emotion of the reunion. In that moment, Jon forgave him for everything.

Robb's hands settled on his shoulders.
"Thank you for bringing the girls back." Robb's serious blue eyes locked with his. "I mean it. Thank you. I can't tell you what that means to me."

Robb was followed by several distinct looking men in fur and armor. Jon recognized the infamous height and grizzly beard of the Umber men. Lord Umber looked him up and down curiously. Jon had never met the Umbers of Last Hearth, but he knew their sigil by heart: an unchained giant. Jon wondered if the sigil would change at all once the giants came for true from beyond the Wall. Unlikely.

Theon Greyjoy was among them and as soon as Robb released him, the ironborn gave Jon a cursory once over before pulling him into a one-armed hug. "Never thought I'd be fucking happy to see you, Snow."

Jon let out a surprised laugh, though it was a humorless one. His skin crawled. "Greyjoy," he said warmly, although he did not feel it in his heart. Jon fought the urge to slay him on the spot.

The white head of Lord Karstark passed him by, as well as the cold and calculating demeanor of Lord Bolton. Lord Cerwyn. The Flints, The Glovers, and the Hornwoods. House Manderly. House Mormont. Jon's head was spinning as lord after lord, and sigil after sigil floated before his eyes and settled into the large hall.

A meeting of lords, Jon realized, and Jon stood into the middle of it. Thoros seemed to realize this too, because he quickly gravitated towards the far back of the hall, away from the center where Jon and Robb stood side by side.

A loud whine and bark could be heard from the head of the hall. Grey Wind had found his brother. Jon turned to call his wolf.

"Ghost!"

"Grey Wind!"

The large, albino direwolf and his brother couldn't be bothered though, as they'd latched onto each others ears and wouldn't let go. Robb laughed and nudged him in the ribs. "Ghost's gotten fat, hasn't he?" Jon shook his head. Ghost was muscular where Grey Wind was skinny and lithe.

"Not fat, strong. I've given him half of all my meals and it's never enough."

"Have you really?" Robb furrowed his brow, and then he seemed to realize where they were and what was occurring. "Ah, Jon. Meet me later, sometime. I need you. I need trustworthy men around me, like you and Theon. You'll tell me right from wrong, won't you?"

"I'm here for you."

Robb smiled. "Good. Good. We'll talk later."

The conversation halted as both men realized nothing more could be said. At least, not in public. Jon took the cue and left to find his seat next to Thoros, and not a moment too soon. Lady Catelyn swept in with the Blackfish at her side. The knight and the lady took their seats at the high table with Robb. The Blackfish's eyes swept the room and lingered on Jon, so Jon turned and made his way toward the back of the now crowded hall.

Thoros looked foreign and out of place. A red star in a sea of grey and blue and black. The red priest drew quite a bit of attention from the surrounding men, some of which had fought with him at Pyke, but Jon's arrival shifted their focus from Thoros to Ned Stark's bastard.
"Hmm. Mine eyes deceive me. You've got the Northern look, boy. Don' he, Galbart?"

"You, boy!" the man named Galbart addressed him. He had the look of a lord, and Jon searched for his sigil on his clothing but could find none. "You Ned Stark's bastard? Jon Snow?"

"Yes, my lord." Jon bowed his head and took his seat next to Thoros.

"The bastard who rescued the ladies Stark from the iron clutches of the crown," a man with a throaty voice said, and laughed.

Jon bristled at the word "bastard" but said nothing in return.

"A bastard hero. From the bloody songs," another man spat. "Heard he left Ned in the capital."

Thoros put a hand on Jon's shoulder and leaned in close to whisper in his ear, "Remember, Jon Snow. I am your man."

Jon consciously unfisted his hands and exhaled shakily.

"Shut it, all of you," a northman with a deep voice growled. "It's starting."

Jon fell silent and watched the meeting unfold.

First, Robb addressed the lords with both pride, for their victories, and humility, at the presumed loss of Lord Stark. Word had reached Riverrun about the Howling Riot, and it had been grim. Nigh on 500 people had been massacred on the day Lord Stark fled the capital. Rumors of Ned Stark's death had been circulating the city for weeks and with no body, the gruesome tales of the Howling Riot tended to lean in one direction. Death.

During the meeting, Jon learned that Lord Tyrion had escaped from Lady Stark's clutches weeks ago, before her arrival at Riverrun. The imp was presumed to be approaching his father's military camps. Fortunately, Robb had captured Jaime Lannister during the Battle of the Whispering Woods which gave the North greater leverage than if they still held the imp. Apparently, Robb had been questioning the Kingslayer while Jon was interrogated.

Before Jon arrived with the girls, Lady Catelyn had thought to trade Ser Jaime for her daughters. Now, the tide of the war had been turned. Jon receive a few appraising looks when his name was praised by Robb.

After news had been exchanged, a grand argument ensued over whether the Northern Lords should join with Renly, who'd proclaimed himself King despite Stannis' superior claim as the elder brother, or Stannis, who had cultivated no love from the people of the North, nor any people in general.

The Lords were obviously and adamantly against any notion of fealty to Joffrey. Most were insulted that Joffrey hadn't even the decency to execute Lord Stark formally. It was murder, they claimed, and Jon pounded his foot in agreement. The Northern Lords demanded the bones of their liege lord to bury in Winterfell. When Lady Catelyn began to look faint, the topic was quickly changed.

Men argued back and forth about the Lannister conspiracy. Names and accusations and questions circulated. Was Joffrey illegitimate? It was generally believed so, but the question came up again and again. At this point, Jon found it necessary to speak.

He stood suddenly and locked eyes with Robb. Thoros banged his fist on the wooden table but it did nothing to quiet the debate. Suddenly, Ghost reared his head back and let loose an ear splitting howl. At once, the eyes and ears of the hall turned to the albino and his master. Jon placed a hand on
"My lords," Jon began, and made an effort to speak slowly and clearly, in the voice he once used to address his sworn brothers in the great hall of Castle Black. "I was with Lord Stark in his final days as Hand of the King. During that time, we investigated the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Lord Jon Arryn. We believe he was murdered by those loyal to the Queen,"—there were some cries of outrage, and Jon waited for the noise to die down—"Before his death, Jon Arryn was comparing King Robert's bastard children to his trueborn children, and found the princes and princess to lack the Baratheon traits of blue eyes and black hair. In Maester Malleon's *Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms*, each and every child of the Baratheon house has had black hair and mostly blue eyes, since the days of Orys Baratheon. Even without the right coloring, Joffrey does not resemble King Robert in build or character."

"Appearance alone does not determine one's bloodline or purity of blood," Lord Bolton's smooth baritone interrupted.

"Let my brother finish telling his story," Robb chimed in. "I am curious about it's ending, Lord Bolton."

Robb gave him a nod and Jon continued.

"Jon Arryn discovered this falsehood, and when he confronted the Queen, he fell mysteriously ill, despite being known to be in good health. The Hand's Maester was sent away for trying to cure him, and Maester Pycelle took over Lord Arryn's treatment, a man who owes his position to Tywin Lannister. Jon Arryn's last words? 'The seed is strong.' Stannis Baratheon fled the city. After the Hand's death, his squire was elevated to knighthood, and then conveniently killed by the Mountain during the Hand's tourney. Another loyal, Lannister man."

There were some quiet murmurs around the hall and Jon paused to gather his wits. During his next words, Jon made an effort not to look at the Lady Catelyn. Bran's fall affected them all, but none so much as his mother, and it would not do to rub salt on an open wound.

"Robert Baratheon traveled North for a new Hand and while at Winterfell, he went on a hunt. Gone from the castle, Brandon Stark is mysteriously thrown from an abandoned, broken tower. The only evidence to date? A long, golden hair." Jon let those words linger in the air, and then continued. "Bran survived this fall and an assassin was sent to ensure he never spoke a word of what—or who—he saw. My lords, for knowing the truth, Jon Arryn was murdered. Ser Hugh was murdered. Stannis Baratheon fled the city. My brother was crippled, and Lord Stark was attacked for wanting to know why. Joffrey Waters is a bastard. There is no doubt."

Jon sat down. Several lords voiced their agreement, Lord Umber being the loudest amongst them. Robb leaned back heavily in his chair and gave Jon a subtle wink.

"The proper course is clear!" Ser Donnel Locke stood and proclaimed, stalking in front of the crowd. "Pledge fealty to King Renly and move South to join our forces with his!"

"Renly is not the King," Robb stated firmly.

"You cannot mean to hold to Joffrey, my lord. Not after what your father's bastard has told us? He sent your father to his death!"

"That doesn't make Renly a King," Robb said and shook his head. "He's Robert's youngest brother. Bran can't be Lord of Winterfell before me. Renly can't be King before Stannis."
"Do you mean to declare us for Stannis?" the knight asked incredulously.

A few men voiced their dissent. A general argument began again, this time surrounding the competing claims of Renly and Stannis.

While the lords argued, Jon recalled the hard, strong figure of Stannis standing on the Wall, looking down with icy eyes on the forgotten hordes of Wildlings. Men. Women. Children. With nowhere to go, and no one to help them. Nine out of ten wildlings bent the knee to Stannis, and Stannis had raised them up as loyal men. When Stannis marched South, he won the loyalty of the mountain clans. King Stannis returned Deepwood Motte to House Glover, when no one else in the North had the strength to oppose the ironborn. Would Lord Glover be frowning so severely at the mention of Stannis' name, if he knew that one day his family might march under the fiery heart and stag?

Stannis recognized the threat of the Others. A threat Robb didn't even understand yet. Had it been Jon in Robb's seat, he might have declared for Stannis.

_He offered me Winterfell, Jon thought wistfully, my heart's desire. And he promised me vengeance._

"MY LORDS!" Lord Umber roared and stalked in front of the crowd. Jon was pulled from his thoughts.

"Here is what I say to these two kings," said the lord, and he spat on the ground.

Jon raised an eyebrow, and Thoros and he exchanged amused looks. The gathered lords laughed, a welcome relief from the tension.

"Renly Baratheon is nothing to me! Nor Stannis! Why should they rule over me and mine from some flowery seat in the South!"

Jon thought of the single glimpse he'd had of the iron throne. A knotted mess of melted steel and broken hilts. The seat of an uncompromising conqueror. Jon would not call it flowery, nor would he say that King's Landing was a flowery city.

"What do they know of the Wall? Or the wolfswood? Even their Gods are wrong!"

Lady Mormont and her daughters laughed. The jest was meant to mock, but the tone of the lord's speech was leading. What was Lord Umber suggesting?

_What does Lord Umber know of the Wall?_ Jon thought cynically. Was it Rattleshirt or Mance Rayder who first dubbed all those who lived south of the Wall, Southerners? The Free Folk believed themselves the true Northerners, and Jon could not deny them that title after everything he'd seen… the cold in the night. And the croaking, crackling screech of the Others, like ice shattering under too much pressure.

"Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again?"

Jon felt his stomach drop and his mouth go dry. _No, _he thought.

"It was the dragons we bowed to, and now the dragons are dead!"

_Not all of them_, Jon recalled the red comet and his visions in the fires. Wings of black and green and white.

Lord Umber drew his steel and pointed toward Robb. Jon saw his brother's hands clench and his face pale slightly. In the background, Jon saw a column of light appear as the door opened and
closed. A man in rags entered the hall, limping.

"There! Sits the only King I mean to bend my knee to—"

Several things happened at once.

"Lord Stark?" someone asked. The call was taken up and several men stood in confusion.

"THE KING—!"

The man headed straight for the head table. Robb and Lady Catelyn stood, and the latter ran to the man.

"NED!"

Lord Umber's sword fell to his side as he stared dumbly at the figure being embraced by his wife and son. The Lords all rose and bowed, and Jon gaped in disbelief as the haggard, freshly scarred, and exhausted face of Eddard Stark appeared from behind his wife's red hair.
A/N Apologies for the delay. I moved house. My new house is bigger and I have a whole room for my office now (really fancy stuff). During the move, I lost my little blue notebook with all my story notes. But, then I found it in my dog's boxes of toys. I think it accidentally fell in there when I was packing.

Yeah... nobody cares. But you can attribute this chapter to my dog, Blossom. She graduated with a degree from UPenn and is largely known by her pseudonym: Diggit Debarkus.

The doors to Lord Tully's solar closed behind them. Lord Stark looked down at his daughters with a bemused expression. Someone had woken Arya and Sansa from their slumber and both girls were crying in their father's arms.

"When last we saw each other, neither of you were speaking to me."

Lord Stark's confession prompted a wail from Sansa and further tears from both girls. Arya denied it and punched her father mildly in the stomach. "Stupid," she said.

Jon's heart warmed at the sight of such affection. The guilt that had ratcheted so tightly around his heart loosened, knowing it would not be possible if he hadn't acted when he did. When Lord Stark finally escaped his daughters' clutches, his eyes sought Jon's.

"Jon," the lord breathed, sounding both relieved and surprised.

Jon straightened and clenched his hands.

"Thank you for taking care of your sisters. I don't know what would have happened if the Queen Regent had taken either of them."

"How..." Jon asked and trailed off.

He didn't know where to start. He had assumed he had not done enough to alter the fate of Lord Stark. Jon never suspected his Father would survive King's Landing, not after he'd seen him lying on his sick bed, helpless and unconscious. The grave had been dug.

Lord Stark's appearance had shocked the gathered lords. For Jon, it was like seeing a man rise from the dead. Joffrey had not beheaded Eddard Stark publicly, as he had in his previous lifetime, but Jon had attributed the difference to the current accelerated chain of events. Joffrey or the Queen might have felt the pressure to preserve their family secret and plotted to execute the Hand swiftly during or after the Howling Riot. The Riot may have been the Queen's plan all along.

*He must have taken my advice,* Jon thought, relieved.

"I thought I was going to have to be a lord," Robb pulled his father into a second embrace. "I was
"You will be. One day, Robb, but not today," Lord Stark replied. "Today, I am still alive."

"How, Ned?" Lady Stark asked what they'd all been thinking. But Lord Stark's explanation was halted.

The door opened quietly and Lord Stark greeted the visitor with a formal nod. The faint smell of perfume wafted through the air and the plump, hooded figure glided into the solarium with nary a word of greeting. Jon had the eerie feeling he'd met this character before. Garbed in rich, outrageous purple velvet, the stranger lowered his hood. Lady Catelyn gasped.

"Lord Varys said you reached an agreement, in King's Landing," the Stark patriarch directed the question to Jon, "in exchange for smuggling me out of the city?"

Jon's eyes hardened. The man in velvet gazed at him sympathetically and folded his hands.

"We had a different agreement," Jon's voice was hoarse from speaking at the assembly of lords, "but I faltered on my end. And now, I suppose you would like me to keep playing my part in this mummer's farce. I said no such thing. You aided Lord Stark of your own volition, my lord."

"All is forgiven, my dear boy," Lord Varys' chin dipped low and Jon felt he was staring into the eyes of a predatory hawk. "If I might have a private word, we may renegotiate. After all, I've kept my end of both agreements."

Lord Varys placed special emphasis on the word "both" and Jon knew he was referring to the search for Jon's mother and the letters that had been stolen.

Lyanna Stark's elegant script danced across his vision. He had searched those words for meaning, for an explanation to the madness that plagued him at night. His clenched hands shook.

**Snake,** Jon thought viciously.

Lord Stark turned on the perfumed lord, his nostrils flared in anger. "You told me Jon agreed to this. You planned my escape from the city, the riots, in exchange for his service—"

"Serve the Master of Whispers?" Jon asked, unable to restrain himself. "You must be mad. I am no spy!"

"We are all getting ahead of ourselves," Lady Catelyn interjected. "You still haven't answered my question. How did you escape the city? We all thought you were dead! Pycke sent a raven, stating you were being held prisoner for the crime of treason. And how—how did you get that scar?"

Lady Catelyn's voice trailed off to a whisper as she lovingly traced the angry puckered line from Lord Stark's lip to his forehead. It was an awful scar, that broke the left side of his lip and his brow. Lord Stark gently clasped her hands in his and assured her he was fine.

"We heard the girls disappeared," Robb added, "and then nothing but rumors of your death. After the raven from King's Landing, I called the banners and planned on marching down to the Capital and freeing you myself. But at the Neck, a Gold Cloak under the peace banner told us of your execution."

Lord Stark sighed. "So, it will be war."

The lord's proclamation was met with silence. Jon felt Lord Varys' eyes watching him closely. A
strange thrumming was building in intensity beneath his heart.

_Run_, the voice said. Silky sweet and laced with poison. _The Night is dark._

"Sit, and I will tell you my story."

"Perhaps we should wait for morn," Lady Catelyn suggested softly. "You're half dead already, Ned."

"No. I'd rather tell you now, while it is fresh on my mind."

Jon took a few stumbling steps backwards and leaned against the cool stone walls of the solar, silently brooding over Lord Varys' words. He listened to Lord Stark's tale with half an ear. The beginning of the story he already knew—Lord Stark's investigation and the discovery and Joffrey's true parentage—but other events were new to him, such as the dispatch of Beric Dondarrion to reign in the Mountain, Lord Baelish's treachery, and the plot to overthrow Joffrey and seize the Iron Throne.

And then Lord Stark came to the part of his tale Jon had been desperately waiting for.

"When I woke, I was alone. Harwin told me the girls had left with Jon. I was relieved. I could act without fearing for their safety. Unfortunately, my time was cut short. Mere days after I woke, Robert was killed in a hunting accident. An accident that was no accident."

"What do you mean?" Lady Catelyn asked.

"The Queen drugged his wine—" Sansa gasped, "—I am certain of it. Or bribed her cousin to continue prying him with the skin. Robert could never resist the drink. He labored for days. Before he died… I asked him about the dagger."

"The Valyrian dagger?" Robb clarified. "The imp?"

"No, the dagger did not belong to the imp. It was Joffrey's."

"Impossible!" Lady Catelyn gasped. "Petyr said he lost the dagger to the imp!"

Lord Stark shook his head grimly. "Robert confirmed he had won the dagger on Prince Joffrey's name day, during the tourney. Jon had always known that the dwarf was a diversion. I should have listened to him."

Jon inclined his head respectfully, acknowledging the apology. It needn't be said.

Catelyn was taken aback by the betrayal, tears filled her eyes when she realized her childhood friend had played the final part in her husband's near demise.

"Petyr!" She said and clutched her heart, her face a shade of pale white. "I shall never forgive him for this. That worm! That— that snake!"

"I am sorry, my love," Ned sighed. "I know he was dear to you once, but that time has passed."

"He is dead to me," Lady Catelyn said with finality. "To think I once spared his life out of compassion. I should have let Brandon kill him that day."

"I knew then that Baelish was goading me into seizing the throne. The day Robert died, Joffrey was declared King and I gathered the last of my guard to leave the Capitol before I would be called to swear fealty. We had to fight through the gates. I lost… I lost all my men. A riot broke out and a
knife gave me this scar. Yoren, a man of the Night's Watch, came to my aid. We fled through the sewers and Yoren took me as far up the King's Road as he could. I traveled under the guise of a prisoner. On the road, we were attacked by Gold Cloaks, but our group managed to fight them off. I left the survivors to make my way towards Riverrun. That is when I crossed paths with Lord Varys' envoy on the road. An envoy carrying a peace banner."

"The Queen tasked me with finding Lord Stark and his rogue daughters. No simple task," Lord Varys tittered. "I was also given King Joffrey's terms, to deliver to the northern army at Riverrun. Admittedly, I volunteered for the duty. The Queen is already suspicious of my loyalties and now I am forced to deliver news of my failure. Pity."

"Indeed," Lord Stark said, his voice colored with suspicion. "Lord Varys informed me that the Howling Riot was a diversion of his own making. A plot he concocted with Jon, to help ease my passage out of the city. We arrived in Riverrun together, unharassed, and that is the end of my tale."

Jon narrowed his eyes at the Master of Whispers, whose face revealed nothing.

"We appreciate your assistance in this matter, Lord Varys," Robb said, somewhat reluctantly. "The Starks are indebted to you."

"I serve the realm, my lord," Lord Varys stood and bowed. "All the realm."

Lord Varys statement was met with an unimpressed silence. The perfumed lord looked unfazed by this lukewarm reception, and lowered himself back down into his seat.

"You must be exhausted," Robb said, breaking the silence. Lord Stark nodded mutely. "I will have a servant draw you a bath, and fetch you clean clothes. You've been traveling for too long. Whatever else there is, it can wait until the morning."

"In a moment, Robb, we still have matters to settle. Sansa, Arya, to bed."

The girls looked to protest, but a stern look from their mother had them saying their goodbyes. Jon looked down in surprise when Arya squeezed his hand, and then she was gone.

"What is this agreement, between you and my son, Lord Varys?" Lord Stark asked, once the girls were gone. "Tell me the truth."

"Jon Snow and I have a private contract."

All eyes turned to Jon, so he left the window to approach Lord Varys. "Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of my family. I admit to our dealings, but I reneged on our terms, and so did you. I left the city without my father. You owe me nothing. I owe you nothing. What do you want?"

Lord Varys smirked and opened his billowy sleeves to reveal a stack of letters. Jon's eyes widened but he made no move to take the proffered parchments. The breath had left his body. "What are those?" Lord Stark asked.

Jon registered the question dimly, a strange buzzing was building in his ears, making it difficult to focus on anyone or anything other than the outstretched letters. There, on top, Lyanna Stark's fluid cursive was just barely legible. The life within me grows... she had written. A pain began to radiate from his chest.

"Do you want to know what I think, Jon Snow?"

Jon had never hated anyone's voice the way he hated Lord Varys'.
"I think you already know, but the truth is so terrifying you have rightfully run from it."

Jon took a shocked step backwards. Lord Stark reached for the letters but Lord Varys pulled them back.

"A grand secret. A grand conspiracy," Lord Varys sighed and the letters disappeared once more behind his voluminous sleeves. "You could not hide from me forever, Jon Snow. After all, I am the Master of Whispers and Secrets. I am a friend to you, and all your kin. You need not fear me."

"Stop speaking in riddles," Robb growled and Jon was taken aback by his brother's sudden animosity. It was glorious. "Whose side are you on?"

"Side? I'm on no one's side, Robb Stark. Lord Vary leaned forward, his pale eyes seeking Jon's but Jon wasn't looking at him. He was cradling his head, staring at the red and blue threads of the carpet. The spot between his temples was pounding. He felt strangely detached from the floor. Robb's feet moved menacingly forward but Jon could not move at all.

"I have already said what I have to say. Are you confused, Jon Snow? These letters haunt you. I can see it in your eyes. Why do they haunt you? Because you already know the truth."

"No… It cannot be. You lie." Jon realized too late, he spoke aloud. "The babe is dead."

"My dear boy… if I had only know."

Lord Stark intervened bodily, placing himself between Jon and Lord Varys. Jon suddenly didn't care if he appeared distressed, he was distressed. What Lord Varys suggested was blasphemy and it was impossible. Jon struggled to understand. I am your father, he told me.

Jon's attention focused on the bald man in front of him. The smell of perfume was nauseating.

"The Silver Prince and the Knight of the Smiling Tree," Jon said haltingly.

"Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark—"

"ENOUGH!" Lord Stark moved quickly to grab the Master of Whispers by his neck. He hefted the man onto his feet and slammed him into the Wall. Lady Catelyn shouted at her husband to stop.

"Silence!" Lord Stark shouted over the noise of the room.

Jon staggered backwards. Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. The pounding in his head grew worse and he could no longer bear to look anyone in the eye. His feet moved of their own accord, stumbling backwards. He wanted to run from this, he wanted to flee.

Robb grabbed his arm firmly, "Jon—" he began, but Jon's ears could only focus on Lord Varys' simpering platitudes.

"If I had only known, Jon Snow, I would never have left you in the cold of the North—"

"I SAID ENOUGH!"

In the most cowardly act of his life, Jon fled.

He raced through the labyrinthine halls of Riverrun, desperate to put distance between himself and the Lord of Whispers. The perfume in the air was replaced with incense drifting from the roof of the Sept.
A thousand thoughts manifested in his mind. Each more terrible than the last. An ache was building in his heart and spreading throughout his limbs. He was on fire and he was running from it.

He locked the door to his rooms behind him and ran straight for the window to vomit out the side. When he was done, he sunk down onto the floor and cradled his head. Ghost licked his face comfortingly, but it did little good. Jon had memorized the words of those letters long ago, in the dark of the night, and now they came back to haunt him viciously.

*I have taken the seed of my enemy into my house.* My enemy, Lord Stark had written. *My enemy.*

Jon gasped for breath.

*I am grateful the boy does not have his father's hair.* I could explain away the eyes, knowing my public affairs with Ashara, but the hair? The enemy's silver hair. His dark violet eyes.

*I tested him with the fire and he shows no evidence of the blood.* Jon had not been burnt since he'd been reborn in Winterfell.

*I cannot divulge Lyanna's location, but know that she is safe with members of my own Kingsguard.* Rhaegar had kept her secret. The duty of the Kingsguard is to protect the royal family. The blood of the dragon.

*My Silver Prince has left me, alone and with only white cloaks to keep my company. Each day, the life within me grows stronger, but I am fading.* She died there, Jon realized.

"I killed her," Jon gasped, suffocating on air. "I killed her."

*I am safe at the Tower of Joy with my protectors, but I grieve for the news you have given me. Ride at first light. I am not long for this world.*

*Is my mother alive,* Jon had asked. *Does she know about me, where I am, where I'm going? Does she care?*

"No!" He cried.

*I killed my mother. I killed her coming into this world.* Jon crumpled into a ball and wept violently.

After Jon was finished weeping, he felt a husk of a man. His thoughts became torture. He tried to picture her face. Tried to imagine her beauty, her voice, and her laugh. Jon thought of her statue in the crypts beneath Winterfell. He had not visited her. Naught but once, and then, only briefly.

"Your Aunt Lyanna," Lord Stark had told him. He had made Jon light the candle at her feet. It only happened once. The day after Bran was born. Lady Catelyn had labored in the night, and Lord Stark had sought his sister's grave. Why? Jon had wondered as a child. Why me?

He could not find rest. The guilt, the anger, and the injustice of it all kept him awake. He longed for her presence. Thoros came to bang on his door sometime in the night, but Jon did not answer. None of the Starks came to find him, and Jon wondered what happened in the Blackfish's solar and if Lord Varys was still in Riverrun. Did Lord Stark threaten the lord's life? Had Varys been chased out of Riverrun? Jon did not know.

It was well past the hour of the wolf when Jon stumbled out of bed and pulled on his boots. Ghost
was at his side in a heartbeat and together they left the dark confines of Jon's room and journeyed to the great hall.

The pounding in his head was fading, but when it left he felt empty, stretched thin. He walked as if in a trance. Unable to feel. The world had changed in the blink of an eye. Colors dulled. Smells faded. And the very air felt stagnant.

Jon lingered in the hall where Robb Stark was nearly named the King of the North. He stood in front of the fire and gazed into the flames, but no visions came. Alone and frustrated, he wandered Riverrun aimlessly. The castle was large and empty at this time of night. Jon met no one.

Eventually, he came to where Riverrun's throne sat unoccupied. He stared at the tapestries of the houses sworn to House Tully and ran an absent minded hand over Lord Tully's throne. Jumping fish and rolling waves had been carved into the arms, long ago.

A shadow fell over him. Jon turned to meet his once-father's gaze. He did not need to ask why the lord was still awake.

"You lied to me."

He hadn't meant to speak. The accusation hung heavily in the air. Jon's voice was raw. He sounded alien to himself. The ache in his heart started once more and he winced, willing it away.

"I did."

I did. I did. I did. Lord Stark's words echoed in the stone rafters of the hall.

"You said, I am your father," Jon said, his voice growing in strength. "You said, I am still your father."

"I did."

I did. I did. I did.

Lord Stark remained unflinching in the storm of Jon's anger.

"You were never going to tell me." Jon already knew. He had lived that life. "You would have let me go, content to let the truth be buried."

"I did it to protect you, Jon."

How can you be so calm? Jon wanted to scream and shout, and break things, and then he wanted do it again. "You lied to me," he repeated. "Everything I am. Everything I thought I was. It's been a lie." As he continued to speak, he felt his strength sapping. The words turned sloppy and broken. "I was your son. I wanted to be a Stark. It was all I ever wanted, but I don't have your blood."

Lord Stark took a step forward and pulled him into a suffocating embrace. Jon's face was buried in the fabric of Eddard's collar. It smelled of home. Jon felt comforted, and for some reason that thought drove him to stinging, unwanted tears.

"I'm not your son," Jon sobbed.

"I know."

I know, I know, I know, echoed across the hall.
Jon recalled dying, how when the knives lifted, he wished they'd never come back. But the daggers always came back, and so did Lord Stark's words.

"Why does it pain me so?" He whispered, confused. "You were my father, and now you are not. The man I thought I knew is now a mystery to me. A name written in the history books. A villain."

"I never meant to hurt you."

"I want to know the truth," Jon gathered his wits and pulled away. His face was hot and red with grief and the separation brought him cold relief. "I want to know why."

His father—no, Lord Stark's eyes grew distant. For a moment, Jon feared he would not answer.

"I do not have all the answers, Jon," Lord Stark said sadly. "But I will try my best."

"Tell me," Jon demanded, and for once in his life, Lord Stark acquiesced.

"After the Rebellion was over and Robert was crowned King, I received news of my sister's whereabouts at the Tower of Joy. Ashara Dayne was her caretaker, and it was Ashara who smuggled a letter from my sister to me."

Lord Stark's eyes grew distant. Jon had heard this name before, Ashara Dayne. The woman Lord Varys first suspected to be Jon's mother.

"I, and six loyal men, rode to Lyanna's aid. A fury had taken me. I was desperate and angry. When we reached the Prince's Pass, and found the Tower, it was guarded by members of the Kingsguard. The Lord Commander, Ser Oswell Went, and Ser Arthur Dayne among them. We fought a long and bloody duel on the steps leading up to the tower's single room. In the end, only myself and Howland Reed remained."

Lord Stark paused to collect himself. He struggled over his next words.

"I ran up the tower to find my sister, and... I did find her, only not as I expected. Her belly was swollen and she lay in a pool of blood. I pulled you from her without the assistance of Ashara… whose grief over her brother's death was too great. Lyanna was barely alive when she held you, and she spoke to me in her delirium. She knew your father was dead, and she begged me to keep you safe… she—"

He broke off, the words choked in his mouth. Jon had been listening raptly, and when the story paused, he gathered the nerve to look up. Lord Stark's eyes were overcome with grief. Jon rested a hand on his shoulder, which prompted the lord to continue.

"She made me promise to keep you safe. To protect you from harm. Her last act was to wrap you in the sigil of your father's house and place you in my arms… I gathered the last of her belongings, anything that might incriminate you and rode to Starfall. Robert and I did not see eye-to-eye about the murder of the Targaryen children, and I greatly feared that he would kill you."

Jon had nearly forgotten that piece of history. The murder of the Targaryen children was only spoken about in hushed whispers. *The rape of the Princess*, Jon thought. *The children's blood dripping from the walls. And the Mountain rode free.*

"I named you Jon, and claimed you as my bastard." Lord Stark took a shuddering breath. "I also named you Jon… because Jon Arryn was like a father to me. When the Mad King called for my blood, Jon Arryn raised his banners for my life, so I would have raised my banners for yours."
Ned Stark fell silent. The hall was quiet, and still at his declaration. Jon's hand fell away. He did not know what to say. All the questions he wanted to ask seemed so wrong now. Did she love me? Did he?

"Ashara cast herself into the sea. If she had not sent for my aid, her brother might still be alive. That, and I do not think she could bear children after her own stillborn birth. She had been brought to the Tower of Joy by her brother, Arthur, to assist Lyanna in the birth, and I think she resented it greatly. After the war—when we returned to Winterfell... I locked it all away. Anything I'd written, anything with the name Targaryen, and the cloak she wrapped you in. I tried to destroy it. I tried to burn it. I... couldn't. She was my sister and I didn't know if one day... I would tell you the truth."

Jon took a step back. His mind was reeling. My mother is Lyanna Stark. And my father is dead. The truth was finally known. He was the blood of the dragon. The seed of the man who tore the Seven Kingdoms apart.

One small, innocuous thought came to the forefront of his mind.

"You tested me..."

"What?" Lord Stark's head rose and he furrowed his brow.

"On the foot," Jon clarified. "You burnt me."

"Oh. Yes. How did you know? Some of your ancestors have shown a... proclivity for magic. I needed to make sure. If anyone had noticed, your life might have been forfeit."

"A proclivity," Jon took off one of his gloves and approached one of the burning braziers. He shoved his hand into the fire and drew forth one of the burning coals. Still aflame, he held it up to Lord Stark's eyes. "This... answers many questions."

Jon held the fire for a moment before throwing the coal away. Lord Stark stared at him wide eyed.

"When did this happen?"

"Months ago," Jon closed his eyes. "I couldn't tell you."

"You could have told me," Lord Stark stepped closer. "I would have listened."

"We were estranged," Jon whispered, "we were not father and son. Nor shall we ever be again."

The fog faded from Lord Stark's eyes and his frown deepened. "Is that your wish?"

"No, but it is the truth," Jon groaned and fell back onto the stone steps. "We cannot go back."

"No," Lord Stark agreed. "I suppose you are right. But we can go forward."

Jon rested his head against his hands. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the first rays of sunlight filter through the stained glass windows.

"You've changed so much, Jon. You are not the boy I once knew. Something has hardened you, and made you into the man I see today," Lord Stark lowered himself to sit at Jon's side. They both stared forward. "You are sad. I see it in your eyes when noone is looking. I would have you smile again."

"I cannot," Jon admitted, more to himself than to the other man.

"More the pity."
"Will it ever end?" Jon asked. "Will the pain fade?"

Lord Stark bowed his head in thought.

"No," he finally said. "No, it will never ease. But… you will learn to live with it."

"Tell me about my mother."

This time, it wasn't a question.
A/N Thank you to all the reviewers for your support and kind words. These chapters are getting very long, so it's taking longer to post.

In other news, I have been enjoying Season 6 greatly! What do you like so far? I love that Sansa and Jon's storylines have merged. Ramble, ramble, ramble. Snow! Corn! Please keep reading because Chapter 17 is very good and I can't wait to post it but we have to wade through this crap first! Snow!

Dawn crept over the Riverlands. Green fields and little rivers were slowly bathed in golden light. Jon Snow, his companion Ghost, and the Lord of Winterfell witnessed the sun's glorious return on the banks of the Red Fork.

Jon stood in the current, thigh deep in frigid, murky water. It was a cold morning. Colder than normal. His breath misted slightly, and his feet and fingers were numb. Ghost was trying and failing to catch a fish in the river's rushes.

After Lord Varys revealed Jon Snow's parentage and Lord Stark's subsequent confession, Jon desired time alone. At Castle Black he would have retreated to the Wall, where he could stare across the Haunted Forest at distant snowy mountains, meditating on the fate of the world. Or, he might have taken solace with Commander Mormont's old raven, asking it questions and feeding it corn, waiting for it's croaks to turn into words like "Snow", "War" and "Others". But they were not at Castle Black, so he left the castle to seek peace in the waters of the Trident.

Lord Stark had followed, claiming insomnia. When Jon protested they argued vehemently, but the Lord of Winterfell eventually won their verbal spar, stating it was unwise to go anywhere alone in the current climate of war.

They hadn't spoken since. They'd already spoken too much, in Jon's opinion, and he preferred the silence.

The rush and roar of the river drowned out the screaming of his thoughts. Jon closed his eyes. The warmth of the sun kissed his face. He wished the voices away, but it did no good.

Not just a bastard. The Prince's bastard, Ser Alistair sneered. The old knight's grey hair was spotted with blood.

There is power in King's blood, Jon Snow. Melisandre's rich alto drifted through his mind. When the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone.

Jon shook his head, groaning. It was her voice, most of all, that he wished he could silence.

Hundreds of leagues away, a small tributary named the Ruby Ford connected to the mighty Trident. It was on those waters that Jon Snow's true father was slain in battle by Robert Baratheon and his mighty war hammer. Jon cupped his hands under the current, the stream dipped and swirled and
danced about his palms. He could hardly feel his fingers anymore. It was a welcome change from feeling too much.

The sun reached Riverrun, illuminating the ramparts of the River Kings' castle. Lord Stark stood behind him, knee deep in the waters, no doubt wondering what Jon would do next now that the sun was rising.

Jon didn't know anything. The fundamental truth of his life had been disproven. He was not Ned Stark's bastard. He was Rhaegar Targaryen's son by Lyanna Stark, the Winter Rose. Jon was told as a child that Lyanna Stark had been beautiful, and kind, and honorable and fiercely loyal to her own, but Jon knew next to nothing about his true father. A monster. A villain. A rapist.

A prince. A Targaryen. The last dragon. Jon stared down at the water in his hands. Why did he do it? Was he mad?

The only thing Jon knew for certain was that Rhaegar Targaryen died in the Ruby Ford, which was connected to the Trident, which was connected to the Red Fork, and Jon stood in those waters now.

If he had lived, Jon wondered, would I have been raised as a prince in King's Landing? It struck Jon as ironic. All his life, he'd been treated as a worthless bastard, a stain upon his honorable father's name, and now he wondered how Rhaegar the Prince would have treated him. Would he have loved Jon, as he loved Lyanna Stark? Would he have rejected him for killing his mother at birth, as Lord Tywin did Tyrion Lannister? Would he be considered a bastard or trueborn? Lyanna's letters said they married under the heart tree. Was his surname now Targaryen?

No, Jon's stomach lurched at the thought. I will take no more names.

Jon turned to face his father and froze.

There, distantly, a strange coloring to the sky. The sun had risen but behind it remained a red tail that refused to dissipate. Jon stared long and hard. He recalled this comet.

When the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Melisandre's voice distorted, at once transforming into the unmistakable timbre of a man's voice. Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone.

Wake dragons out of stone. Jon mulled over this phrase.

"An ill omen." Lord Stark interrupted his thoughts.

He, too, was staring at the red sword emblazoned across the sky.

"A necessary one," Jon said. "It marks the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

Jon did not reply. The crevasse between them still existed, long and dark and cold. Though it would grow no more, it would never cease to exist, and Jon silently mourned the loss of both fathers. The one he never knew, and the one he had lost.

"It is time we returned."

Jon closed his eyes and sighed, dreading their return to the castle. "Do they know?" Jon asked as he took his first step away from the current.
"My son and my lady wife are aware, and I fear we may have been overheard. I also do not trust Lord Varys to keep his word." Lord Stark looked away, toward the rising sun. "You must leave."

Jon nodded and left the bank to trudge towards the battlements without so much as a "by your leave". Lack of sleep was catching up to him and he wanted nothing more than to collapse on his bed of furs and sleep away the past several days. Perhaps this time, he'd wake at Castle Black, another year in the past and without this lifetime's worries.

*I used to long for Winterfell and now I want nothing more than my small cot at the Wall.*

"Today… Or tomorrow, you must leave tomorrow," Lord Stark insisted. "In the morning."

Jon swallowed heavily. "Where—?" he tried again, his voice was hoarse— "Where would you have me go, my lord?"

Lord Stark stopped, and Jon turned around to face him. His former father's hands shook slightly at his sides, and his eyes were pinched in pain. He opened his mouth once, to speak, and then thought better of it. Jon waited for his orders but they never came. Instead, Lord Stark swept past him and spoke without looking.

"It isn't safe for you here," Lord Stark said softly, as they passed underneath one of Riverrun's many gates. "For those who still harbor lingering loyalties to the ancient regime, even as a bastard, your claim to the throne puts you in contention with both Joffrey and Stannis. There are those who would gladly see the return of a Targaryen dynasty. They would pledge their swords to you, their armies! Stannis will not risk that happening. The Lannisters have already issued a warrant for your death. You are a target to be shot at, nothing more!"

"I make no claim," Jon stated, his voice as hard as iron. At the moment, nothing sickened Jon more than the thought of sitting on the Iron Throne. "I will join the Night's Watch."

"They will seek to execute you swiftly. Wherever you go," Lord Stark whispered harshly.

"I must remain at your side." Jon furrowed his brow. *My knowlege of what will come to pass… I must warn them. The Wildlings. The Others. The Boltons. The Ironmen. Enemies at every turn. Daggers in the dark.*

"A claim will be made for you. Regardless of whether or not you wish it," Lord Stark said sharply, pausing in front of the large double doors leading into the castle proper. "And the Lannisters put little stock in oaths. I fear you have no choice in this matter, Jon. It is not safe for you. Not in Westeros."

Jon's eyes widened. *Essos,* he thought. *It is as Thoros foresaw.*

"Once Stannis is crowned, and the kingdoms are safe once more, I may be able to negotiate a pardon, and in return you would forfeit your claim and swear never to raise arms against your King."

Jon's eyes swept over the courtyard where the numerous banners of the Northern lords, and the lords of the Riverlands, rippled in the breeze. "You are at war. You need me at your side."

"No, Jon. I need you to stay safe."

Jon's retort was ready on his tongue, when the doors to the castle opened and Robb was in front of them, armored and bedecked in furs. His brother—now cousin—took one look at the both of them and then stormed away wordlessly, toward the stables. Lord Stark sighed and trailed after his eldest son and heir. Jon was left alone on the steps of Riverrun's fortress.
Ghost followed him into the castle. On his way past Riverrun's library, Jon passed Lady Stark.

He rounded a corner and they froze in unison, mere feet away from one another. An immeasurable amount of time passed where Jon was afraid to move, afraid to breath, afraid to blink for fear of her scathing tongue. Tears streaked her face and her hair was slightly disheveled, diminishing the normal beauty of the Lady of Winterfell.

Blue Tully eyes stared unseeing at his face. Red-rimmed, they swept over the arch of his brow, the bridge of his nose, across his lips and jaw and neck, and then back to his eyes. She reached out a hand as if to touch his arm, and then retracted it quickly. Jon was paralyzed, his brain too tired to think of anything to say and his heart too bruised and broken to feel.

"I should be sorry," she whispered.

Jon shook his head wordlessly. He never wanted an apology. "Don't—think nothing of it."

Lady Stark blinked, a look of mute surprise crossed her face. Jon bowed and moved to the side, silently praying for a silent departure.

"You should be angry," she spoke once more, in a soft voice. "Furious, even. You were motherless and I should have been a mother to you. I should have held you and cared for you and loved you like she couldn't. How she must hate me."

"Lord Stark has told me that my mother was a forgiving woman," Jon could only think to say.

Lady Stark nodded once and left. Jon exhaled in relief when the last of her skirts disappeared from view.

Once in his room, Jon lay down on his feather bed and closed his eyes. He slept past breakfast and woke around midday, hungry but well-rested. For a moment, he had forgotten, and when it all came rushing back he curled up into a ball and begged for sleep again. It never came.

An hour later, Samwell knocked on his door and Jon answered, blinking blearily.

"Food?" Sam mumbled, holding up a large plate of cheese and sweetbread.

Jon and Sam ate together. It was a quiet lunch. Sam brought him several old tomes from the forgotten archives of Tully's library. Books on dragons. Jon felt his stomach lurch when he skimmed over a dark illustration of Balerion the Black Dread but he smiled and thanked his brother all the same.

"You should read the inside cover," Sam peered over his shoulder. "I think you'll be very interested to see what it contains."

Jon frowned and flipped to the beginning of the book.

THIS BOOK WAS BORROWED BY

Lord Tyrion Lannister

Son of Tywin Lannister  
Lord of Casterly Rock

ON LOAN FROM

Maester Marwyn of The Citadel in Oldtown
"Tyrion Lannister?" Jon spoke aloud.

"Half these books," Sam's hand gestured to the pile before them, "on loan by Tyrion Lannister."

Jon's mind conjured up an image of the infamous imp, Tyrion Lannister, smoking his pipe and leaning against an aged oak. *A mind needs books as a sword needs a whetstone if it is to keep its edge. That's why I read so much, Jon Snow,* Tyrion had said, smirking at him from above the pages of his newest favorite. In fact, Jon had rarely seen Lord Tyrion without a book in the weeks following their journey to the wall.

"Lord Tyrion knew the importance of these books, and so he borrowed them from the Citadel," Jon thought aloud. "And left them here, why here?"

"Lady C-Catelyn took the imp and his possessions when he was arrested. Maybe she sent the books here, to b-be returned to Oldtown?"

"Lady Stark's husband was in danger. I doubt she cared," Jon said turned a book over in his hand. "They are greatly worn, splattered in mud, the pages torn… Tyrion treated his books with care. A stranger carried these."

"It is a mystery," Sam smiled and shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Jon frowned. He thumbed the pages of the book. *Maester Marwyn,* he wondered. *A potential source of knowledge? An ally or an enemy?*

"You don't like mysteries," Sam commented.

"I do not," Jon replied and put down the book. "Tell me what you have learned."

Sam described what he'd read about dragon horns, the magic of Valyria, and the Targaryen dragons. He spoke of Asshai and the lost lore of the East. Sam waxed and waned about the husbandry, reproduction and known feeding habits of the last living dragons. Jon listened with half an ear, trying to keep the food Sam had been kind enough to bring him from making its way back onto the table.

"Jon… are you alright? You look a bit peaky," Sam swallowed a spoonful of potatoes and quirked an eyebrow at his sombre friend. "More than usual, I mean."

"I didn't realize that I normally look sick," Jon smirked and pushed away his plate. "But I'll be fine, Sam. I just received some... unexpected news."

"I thought you'd be happy. Your father has returned! Is it Lord Varys? He frightens me. I know he shouldn't. I know he's fat like me so he's probably not very good with a sword, but..."

Jon raised his eyebrows, prompting his friend to continue.

"It's just—I was talking to the girl who launders our clothes, and she said that last night Lord Stark had a row with the Lord of Whispers. She said that Varys brought King Joffrey's terms to Lord Tully and the Northmen. Were they poor terms?"

"I don't know," Jon said and exhaled a large breath. "I never read them. I was distracted by another matter."

"What is it?" Sam reached over to pet Ghost's ears, the direwolf nuzzled Sam's hand and Jon decided to tell him.
"My father told me my mother's name." Jon clasped his hands tightly, to control their shaking. "Only he's not my father. My mother was Lyanna Stark, and my father was—was Rhaegar Targaryen."

Sam blinked, his jaw unhinged. "You jest."

Jon shook his head.

"Honest, Jon. You're not pulling my—my leg or about to tell me you're also a merman in disguise?"

Jon sighed. "Do I ever jest, Sam?"

"When the mood strikes you, which I've calculated to be after two and a half pints."

Jon couldn't stop the smile the made its way onto his face.

"I found letters before I left Winterfell. Letters between my mother and the Prince," Jon sighed. "My father confessed to knowing about the affair. I was born at the end Robert's Rebellion. My fath— Lord Stark claimed me as his bastard to save my life."

There was a moment of shocked silence before Sam's outburst.

"By the Gods!" Sam was shaking his head in disbelief. "Jon! Jon, that's incredible. You're royalty. This explains why you were not burnt at the tourney! Don't think I didn't notice! I may be rubbish at the sword, but I am observant. Here," Sam pulled out one of the books, "Descriptions of the Targaryen lineage and what magic your forebearers could wield. Lady Visenya was said to have been immune to the fire when she rode Vhagar—"

"It's not like that," Jon interrupted and stood, walking to the window where he could see the Trident. "This is a curse. I have to leave."

"Leave?" Sam frowned and lowered his book. "But we just got here! And besides, there's a war going on. We are far safer inside these walls than out in the wilds. Besides, I thought you wanted to help your brother."

Sam looked at his books, the furs, and the various plates of food. Jon knew his friend did not want to leave the comforts of Riverrun behind, more than the actual war.

"I am helping my brother. By leaving," Jon replied and looked at Sam quizzically. "I thought you would be eager to leave for the Watch."

"I'm never eager to travel anywhere," Sam chortled. "I just thought we'd stay for a while longer, that's all. My rear end is still sore from our last adventure."

Jon grinned and was about to respond when a knock sounded on the door. His heart leapt into his throat as his mind conjured up a thousand possibilities. But it was only Thoros, standing with his arms crossed and smiling serenely.

"We are bound for a ship to Essos," Thoros said cryptically and eased himself into the room.

Jon let him pass. At times, Thoros unnerved him greatly with his pale, vacant stare and omniscient words. And yet other days, Jon was certain the red priest knew his mind inside and out. On those days, Jon considered revealing everything, but he always deemed it too soon. Thoros was loyal to no one but his God.

Is that true? Jon argued with himself. He swore himself to me, for whatever reason. He swore as a
Thoros believed in his one true God. Jon was convinced of his sincerity in that regard, at least.

Sam stood and greeted the knight with a slight stutter. Jon's friend was still in awe of the man in red, even though they'd traveled together for quite some time.

"Ser Thoros," Jon said and nodded, wondering how much the knight had eavesdropped.

"Jon Snow," Thoros said and inclined his head and clasped his hands in front of him. "I was wondering if I might beg a few words?"

Without Jon's acquiescence, Sam began to gather his things. "Well, plenty to do tonight," Sam chattered aimlessly. "Lots to pack. Only the best books, I think. I'll speak to the Maester tonight about a loan…" Jon helped him stack the scrolls in his arms. Sam gave Jon one last smile before edging around the red priest and disappearing into the corridor.

A strange silence persisted after Sam's departure. Jon recalled the last time he had been alone with the Red Priest and their brief whispered conversation in Riverrun's great hall.

"You wanted to talk," Jon finally said and gestured for the knight to take a seat. "So do I."

Jon offered the remaining food and drink. Thoros helped himself to the leftovers from Sam's meal and the water jug on the corner table. It was late afternoon now, and the setting sun shone into Jon's single window. It should have blinded Thoros, but the Red Priest did not squint. After his meal, Thoros built a fire using the last of Jon's wood. The red priest cared nothing for the uncomfortable heat it might create, and neither did Jon, now that he thought about it.

"Dark wings, dark words," Thoros sat down and groaned. "Or shall I say, 'fat eunuch, dark words'? Not much poetry there."

"You've heard of Lord Varys' arrival," Jon said, ignoring the jest.

Thoros nodded grimly. "I had a vision of a great Spider emerging from the Trident several days ago, before our arrival."

Jon set down his cup loudly. He could not stop the displeasure from seeping into his words. "You should have warned me. The Spider and I do not see eye-to-eye."

"I did not think it important," Thoros replied and shrugged. "Lord Varys has a hand in every war. Although... there must be some special reason for him to journey so far from the Capital. Something important enough to risk the King's displeasure."

Thoros left the question unspoken. The fire crackled while Jon contemplated what to say. He had trusted Thoros with his knowledge of the Others and the wights. He had trusted Thoros during the tourney, and afterwards. The knight never asked from whence that knowledge originated. Thoros had never questioned Jon, not once.

The moment of decision had come. Once spoken, Jon's heart would have no more room for doubt concerning the Red Priest. It was now, or never. To trust, or not to trust.

Have I not already decided? Jon questioned, turning his gaze once more to the open window. Have I not already extended good faith, and had that faith returned?

"You have told me of this prophecy, and the blade of light. I have heard it before, not so long ago…"
Jon's tale took a great amount of time, he began with the first timeline of events, detailing his time as a black brother, the Battle at the Wall, the Wildlings, the Others and his sparse knowledge of the War of Five Kings. At first, he spoke haltingly, finding it difficult to gather his thoughts, but his voice gained strength over time. And suddenly the story poured from him, a raging current of memory and emotion. Names he had not spoken, faces he had not seen, places he had not yet walked.

It was painful at times, joyful at others. Jon described the priestess Melisandre, and his reluctance to trust her. He spoke of his time as Lord Commander, and his hopes for the future of the Wall and the Night's Watch.

Thoros absorbed the story, only asking questions occasionally, and mostly questions regarding the Others and the state of the wight army. How did they move? Were they fast? Slow? Did the Others have armor of steel, or ice? What was the state of the Wall? Its defenses? Jon knew the answers to some questions, but knew not the answers to others.

Surprisingly—or perhaps unsurprisingly—the Red Priest believed his strange tale.

"She was wrong," Thoros said. "This Melisandre, is wrong. A simple misinterpretation of the flames. Azor Ahai sits before me. I shall not be swayed."

Jon's leap through time only reaffirmed Thoros' belief that Jon was the prophesied hero. The Prince that Was Promised.

"You mustn't say that," Jon protested. "I am not this man. Stannis had Lightbringer. He likely has it now, and is sailing towards Blackwater to show the world."


"One man cannot stop the Others or their army, not even with a magic sword," Jon said sharply.

"It has been prophesied," Thoros replied.

Jon sat back and drummed his fingers against the table. "What prophecy?" he finally asked.

"When the stars bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again. In this dark hour, he shall draw from the fire a burning sword, Lightbringer, and the darkness shall flee before him," Thoros recited. "He is called the Prince that was Promised. A hero to fight in the Battle for the Dawn."

Jon had heard Melisandre say something similar, a lifetime ago. I did not believe it, Jon thought. I still do not believe it.

"We are what we are. Nothing more, nothing less," Jon insisted.

A tense silence followed.

"If I may be so bold, Jon," Thoros leaned forward. "What did the eunuch tell you? What has Lord and Lady Stark in a squabble? What has Robb Stark beating his blade against a tree trunk all day and night?"

Jon had not heard about Robb's anger. They would need to speak... eventually. Before he left.
"Lord Varys imparted a startling secret," Jon opted to say.

"I am sworn to you, Jon Snow." Thoros looked at him fiercely. "I will not betray your secrets. You have already told me of your leap through time, and I believe you. It only confirms what I already know. You are the Lord's chosen one."

Jon sat uncomfortably with the knowledge of Thoros' beliefs.

"You say you would die for me," Jon said. "I do not believe I am this man. You will leave once you realize your folly."

"I have sworn my sword, Jon Snow, and it shall stay sworn. I believe in men worth following."

Thoros paused and took a great breath, his eyes distant. "You do not understand. You are not a man of the red cloth. A world without magic is the sky without stars. It is sound without song. Food without taste. Do you see now? I wandered the dark of Westeros blindly searching for an answer. I had given up hope. Until you."

Thoros held up his hands. Jon leaned forward curiously and there, between two scarred palms, the Red Knight cradled a small flickering flame. The little fire bobbed up and down.

"You made the magic return, and for that, I am eternally grateful."

Thoros clapped his hands shut and the fire was gone. Jon sat back and reflected on Thoros' words. They sat in silence, Jon, staring at the worn wood of the small table in front of him, and Thoros, staring at Jon.

"The reason… for my family's distress is me," Jon said slowly. His tongue felt heavy. It was worse to admit it aloud. He had never said the words explicitly. "Lord Stark is not my father…"

Thoros' eyebrows rose.

"My father is—was Rhaegar Targaryen. My mother was Lyanna Stark."

Thoros exhaled all his breath in a great whoosh. The fire crackled. Jon stood and went to the window. It was nauseating to say the former Prince's name in the same context as his mother's. My mother, Jon mulled over the words. So many years aggrandizing her, idealizing her and fantasizing about their reunion. My mother, Lyanna. I will never know your embrace.

"Lord Stark lied to protect me from King Robert," Jon explained somewhat needlessly.

He gazed at the Red Fork in the distance and unbidden, his thoughts turned to the Ruby Ford. And my father, a monster?

Jon twisted the handle alongside the iron mold of the window, and pried the hinges open. A cool breeze entered the room.

"If the King had known, he would have killed you, that is for certain," Thoros finally spoke. "Do you know what this means, Jon?"

Jon laughed humorlessly. "Yes… We must leave for Essos, like you predicted. I am falling into your Red God's trap."

"No… Not a trap. Fate. Your destiny!" Thoros said passionately and stood. The chair he vacated clattered to the ground noisily. Jon turned, surprised. "Your father was of the fire, and your mother of the ice. You are Azor Ahai. The Prince that Was Promised. The ultimate conciliator between the
forces of good and evil, night and day—"

"I told you," Jon interrupted, his voice raised. "I am not this man."

"How can you have so little faith? You have lived the prophecy, Jon! The song of ice and fire. Your song! The reason for your birth and rebirth. You, who have been sent back in time!" Thoros' eyes were bright, his voice was breathless. "If you only knew, Jon. How long the world has been waiting for your return—"

"Daenerys Targaryen will birth dragons into this world. There is your Prince," Jon pointed out the window. "Across the sea. Ready to reconquer her kingdom. That is who you are sworn to."

Thoros drew his sword and knelt once more, Jon fought the urge to throw him bodily from the room. "Never. Prince Jon, son of Rhaegar and Lyanna. I shall fight for your cause until my last dying breath and for the rest of my life. I'm not certain how many more oaths I must swear, but I will swear than all!"

"Get up," Jon grabbed the knight's arm and pulled. "This is not the time, nor is it the place. We must leave."

"Yes! You are right!" Thoros animatedly jumped to his feet. "Now is the hour of our departure. To Essos! To the last of your kin! And to the dragons you have dreamt. With all due speed!"

Jon could hardly get a word in edgewise before the Red Priest launched into a narrative about the Free Cities, men who would give them shelter, the temples that would aid their cause, a secret order of priests and priestesses sworn to Azor Ahai's second coming. Jon rubbed his head in exasperation. The conversation began with Jon intending to dim Thoros' religious fervor, and he had only strengthened it.

"I will gather my things. Tarly will join us for the time being?"

"He is headed for the Watch, but I suspect we will travel the road together until he can find a ship to Eastwatch, or White Harbor. I doubt he would travel the King's Road without an escort."

Thoros grinned toothily and then bowed. "By your leave, my prince?"

Jon glared at the white of Thoros' bowed head, sighed and gave his consent.

The last of Thoros' red cape disappeared around the door frame and Jon breathed a sigh of relief. *Nothing went according to plan around that man.*

Jon extinguished the fire and refastened his cloak, thinking back on his conversation with the Red Priest.

Although Jon was loathe to admit it, he was beginning to believe in the Red Priest's loyalty. He could no longer deny Thoros a place at his side, if that was what he wished. Thoros had proven to be trustworthy in the past. He had never revealed Jon's identity in the Capital and despite all of his ludicrous claims, he had kept his preaching in public to a minimum. Most importantly, Thoros was a skilled swordsman who had contacts in Essos. Powerful contacts. They would face the sea together.

Only time would tell.

Jon found Robb in a copse of trees.
True to Thoros' word, Jon's brother was swinging his sword at the already stripped trunk of a large oak tree. Robb stopped, panting and sweating, when he saw Jon approach.

They stared at one another, neither willing to speak first. Robb's eyes swept over Jon's southron clothes and Jon noted the regal fur around Robb's grey cloak. Had they ever not looked like brothers before? Had they ever not had the same haircut, the same doublets, and identical pairs of muddy training boots?

The heir to Winterfell stuck his sword in the ground and leaned back, still heaving, to look at the sky, then back to Jon, then at the sky again.

"Is it true?" Robb asked hoarsely, smacking at the pommel of his sword. "Tell me the truth."

Jon nodded.

"Fuck!" Robb swore and angrily stormed back and forth in front of the tree. "I don't know what to do. Mother won't stop crying! She's not speaking with father. Sansa's crying today, but she fainted yesterday when she heard. She asked father if you hated her for being cruel to you, worried because you have royal blood. Don't worry," Robb huffed at Jon's look of horror, "I think she just wanted the attention. Arya's disappeared with her wolf. No one's seen heads or tails of her all day and father's out looking in the camps. Ser Brynden thinks we should declare for you—"

"Don't do that."

"Of course not," Robb paused in his ramblings and ran a shaky hand through his hand. "I thought… I thought we were brothers."

Jon did too. They were always close—sometimes friends, sometimes rivals—but always close. Robb was dependable. Solid like stone.

"Did you know? The Spider acted like you knew."

Jon didn't know how to answer, he opened and closed his mouth. "I… suspected. Your father convinced me otherwise and then I struggled with the lies and the truth. I never knew for certain until your father confirmed it."

"How long?" Robb looked bereft. "Since the wolf carving you found?"

"No, I… didn't think you wanted to know anything about that."

"We were brothers! I was going to legitimize you," Robb scoffed and crossed his arms. He sat down on an overgrown root overlooking the river. "At the end of it all. Give you a name, like I knew you wanted. You wouldn't be an heir, but you'd have a name."

Jon heart beat painfully against his ribs. He had not known. It would have been a great gesture, one that Jon would never have forgotten. "Thank you."

"Doesn't matter now," Robb wouldn't meet his eye, alternating looking at the castle's walls and the tents of the Stark army. "The world changed overnight. Nothing's the same. I'm not a lord anymore. Father's alive and you're… you're my cousin."

"No." Jon gave Robb a different answer than the one he gave Lord Stark, even though he knew it was hypocritical. Robb was right. The world did change overnight. It looked different even now, in the setting sun. "It doesn't have to be different."
"Father told me you'll be leaving, soon. You'll miss the entire war. Every battle... I was looking forward to watching Ghost and Grey Wind rip apart the flanks of the Lannister army. The heroic tale of the brothers Stark, charging into battle with their direwolves." Robb shook his head.

"We'll have time for battles yet." Jon leaned against the large tree.

Robb didn't answer. They sat together in the small grove, watching the sunset. Eventually, it started to drizzle, and Robb unstuck his muddy sword from the ground so they could head in together. Jon fell into step next to his former-brother. Neither seemed ready to break the silence. The rain picked up speed, and soon they were jogging back to the gates.

"I will return," Jon said, when they reached the inner courtyard. He shouted over the thunder. "See me off?"

"I will." Robb's stony demeanor finally broke and he grinned. They were both soaked by the torrential rain. Jon's smiled turned into a laugh. Soon they were clutching each other.

*Our last brotherly embrace. Jon thought. Or perhaps not. I was wrong before.*

"When I am Lord of Winterfell perhaps we will look back on this day and laugh... brother."

"I will be your sword and shield, Robb. One day, I swear it... brother."

The word felt familiar on his tongue. It felt right.
Chapter Summary

I write a majority of these chapters when I've had one too many glasses of wine, so asking me to write more is essentially asking me to become an alcoholic. Just... something to keep in mind.

ENJOY THE STORY! :D

The Starks and the Tully's dined in the long hall, in the company of the other lords. The wooden rafters echoed with the sound of clinking silverware and muffled conversation. Tall, stained glass windows behind the columns had been opened, allowing for light and fresh air to enter the gathering place. Jon and Robb were the first to arrive, and as such, sat alone at the head table.

After their conversation in the woods, Robb had insisted that Jon join the family for one last dinner. Lord Stark had acquiesced to his eldest son's request and that was how Jon found himself sitting next to Robb in front of half the Northern garrison, their clothes muddy and hair still drying from the rain.

Robb tipped back his head and swallowed the last of the brown ale that the Tully steward had brought them. The heir to Winterfell had fallen into a sour disposition upon their arrival, staring sullenly at the Stark bannerman and goading Jon to drink.

"Careful," Jon said when Robb reached for another.

"Hmm, no. I'm not a lord anymore, Jon," Robb said acrimoniously. "No one is watching me too carefully. But they are watching you now."

Jon furrowed his brow and cautiously peer out into the crowd. It was true. Jon caught several knights, and one or two lords, gazing at him with hostility. Three men bearing the sigil of House Mormont looked away and down, ashamed to have been caught. Lord Umber, to the far right, stood with his men and made no shameful show of averting his eyes. No, a proud man like Greatjon Umber would not avert his gaze.

Jon sighed inwardly and looked to Robb.

"You're the more interesting one now," Robb commented and raised his eyebrows challengingly. He leaned forward across his seat and whispered, "They're all talking about my Aunt Lyanna, your mother, and the Prince's bastard."

The Prince's bastard, Jon's mouth went dry and his heart beat painfully in his chest. Not Ned Stark's bastard. The Prince's. I've gone from damnable to demonspawn.

Jon turned back towards the crowd, his head spinning, and his eyes landed on Theon.

The handsome son of Greyjoy was weaving in his seat, a red haired beauty in his lap and a pipe sticking out the side of his mouth. Surrounded by the sigil of the flayed man, Jon's stomach sank as Theon smiled and laughed and joked with the Bolton crowd. The pink banner of the flayed man
hung overttop their table, mouth open, screaming amidst their laughter.

I must speak. I must warn him... Jon's hand clenched into a fist.

"You must think me wretched," Robb sighed, interrupting Jon's thought and bringing him back to the present. Jon frowned in confusion, prompting Robb to continue. "Oh, woe is me. My father is alive and returned. I... I am simply a fool." Robb ran a frazzled hair through his red locks and turned to Jon. "Months. It took me months to gather the lords and even longer to convince them of my right to rule. I argued. I pleaded. I agreed to marry a woman I don't know to get our army past the Green Fork. I've counted more coins this past year than in my entire life. And—"

Robb cut off, shaking his head. "I am tired."

Jon opened his mouth and paused. The eldest son-of-Stark had been a mere step away from the crown of the King of the North, and within a day, the crown and throne had been ripped from him. Jon knew the feeling. Once the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, a single, life altering event had relegated him to the status of bastard once more.

The capacity for true change was intoxicating, Jon reflected, recalling the very moment he gave the order to raise the tunnel gate beneath the Wall. The day that Jon allowed thousands to wildlings to settle the Gift. The day he sealed his fate.

At least they knew the color of green grass before they died, Jon thought, thinking of the Free Folk, And the height of a windmill. And the sound of the redwing blackbird.

"Your labors have ended, but they will not soon be forgotten," Jon said.

That is more than I can say for myself.

"Do you know what he said to me?" Robb asked suddenly. Jon shook his head. "Rest. Rest and be well. I will command."

"I am sorry," Jon frowned. "You have proven yourself capable of command."

"I cannot rest. I will not rest. I must continue," Robb turned to him, blue eyes flashing dangerously. "The war has only just begun, I can feel it. Grey Wind is restless. I dream at night."

And the true war is yet to come... Jon's eyes followed Theon around the hall. Now, a voice in the back of his mind screamed. Tell him now!

And yet, Jon sat in indecision. How much should I reveal? How much can I reveal? Robb thinks of Theon as another brother.

"Robb—" he began.

"—I know," Robb cut him off. "Father has our best interests at heart. The time will come. And so on and so forth."

"No," Jon replied. "I must speak to you regarding another matter. About the war, and your future in the war."

Robb sat back and folded his arms, an appreciative look on his face.

"Speak plainly, brother. As we always have with one another."

"Theon..." Jon gripped the arms of his chair. "Do you plan to keep Theon at your side?
"I thought of sending him to the Iron Islands," Robb said and rubbed his chin, "to seek aid from Balon Greyjoy. With the ironborn ships, we might lay siege to Lannisport by both land and sea. Although, I do not know my father's intentions."

Jon gritted his teeth, preparing for the backlash to follow his next words, "Balon Greyjoy is no friend of the North."

"Mother has already given this lecture," Robb ground his teeth. "Theon was raised in Winterfell. He may not have our blood, but he is one of us. It was he who first swore himself to my cause, when I called my—father's banners."

"Theon has never known his home. He has never known his people, and he idolizes his father. You and I have both seen it. He will seek to prove himself, to our detriment."

"What is your true issue with Theon?" Robb's nostrils flared in anger.

"N-none," Jon was taken aback.

"He is our brother, too, in case you have forgotten. A foster brother, yes. but you of all men should understand the bond between siblings," Robb said harshly. "You have only recently learned of your true father. Will you abandon your Stark greys for Targaryen reds? Would you seek to claim the iron throne now that the truth is revealed?"

"Never," Jon replied scathingly.

"Then," Robb said emphatically, "do not denigrate Theon. Lay your suspicions to rest. You two have never gotten along."

Jon was momentarily silenced. Memories of Theon flitted across his mind. Theon, disparaging Jon in the sparring ring. Theon, flirting with the girls. Theon, with his scathing wit and mocking smile. The Greyjoy at Winterfell always at odds with the Bastard of Winterfell. It was their fate, was it not? To always oppose one another.

*Bran and Rickon*, Jon swallowed his pride.

"He drinks with the Boltons. Last night, and tonight," Jon said softly. "I have seen them together."

"Roose has been a loyal commander, and a stalwart advisor to me," Robb replied without looking, irritation coloring his words. "Although his presence may be unnerving, he has done nothing to warrant suspicion. Theon mocks him daily, and Bolton does nothing. You see treachery where there is none."

"The Boltons and the Starks have always warred—" Jon tried another approach.

"Hundreds of years ago—"

"The practice of flaying is—"

"Is no longer done—"

"—secret dungeons—"

"—marrying a bloody Frey—"

"—rumors of the Bloody Mummers—"
"We are done speaking!" Robb snapped and slammed a hand onto the table. The reverberation caused a candle to topple nearby and the brothers fell quiet as the candle was righted by a nervous looking servant of Riverrun. Robb continued in a whisper, "And we are soon to be eating if our sisters will ever hurry up. I will hear no more gainsaying from you."

*The King has given a command*, Jon thought sardonically.

Robb turned rigidly to face forward. The skin around his eyes had grown taut and he was gripping the edge of the table in anger. Jon wondered if he had done more damage than good.

Another cool breeze drifted through the hall. Jon's eyes were drawn to the Bolton table once more. The flayed man twisted above Theon, writhing and screaming and urging Jon to make another attempt, even if only to fail again.

"You have dreams, Robb," Jon leaned forward, hands clasped, begging his brother to listen. "So do I."

Robb pinched the bridge of his nose and looked away.

Jon felt disappointment welling within. His clasped hands fell to his side and he sat back in defeat. He closed his eyes.

*Bran and Rickon.*

"Ah, finally," Robb said, breaking the tension between them. Jon followed his gaze to the entrance of the hall.

Sansa floated into the dining room on the arm of her father. Garbed in a blue and red gown—an homage to their host, House Tully—she appeared an angelic vision compared to the brown woolen travel dress she had been wearing for months past. She smiled benevolently and lowered herself gracefully into the seat across from Jon.

Jon suppressed the urge to move further down the table. Robb shifted in his seat, obviously uncomfortable with the tension, and greeted his father with a perfunctory nod and tore into the bread.

Lady Stark followed her daughter and husband, eyes still red-rimmed from tears. She seemed calmer than when Jon had last seen her outside the library, almost eerily so. She greeted both Robb and Jon with a curt nod and took her seat next to Sansa, away from her lord husband. The Lady of Winterfell's face was a blank mask. Lord Stark greeted her and she responded with silence. Jon felt pity stirring in his chest.

So it is true, Jon thought privately, Lord and Lady Stark are in the midst of a disagreement. Jon was simply relieved that her displeasure was not directed at him.

Arya appeared at the last minute, covered in mud. Surprisingly, Lady Stark did not send her youngest daughter away immediately to change clothes. In fact, Catelyn Stark hardly seemed to notice Arya's arrival, let alone her attire.

Dinner was a strange affair.

No one spoke. Arya glared fiercely at her father, her plate untouched. Sansa cut her meat perfectly and Robb drank heavily. Conversation rose and fell around the Stark family, but they rarely spoke themselves. The tension between Lord and Lady Stark was painfully noticeable as time stretched on. Lady Catelyn could not spare a glance towards her husband and Lord Stark was perpetually looking to his plate for answers.
"Why is no one talking about it?" Arya said bitterly, halfway through the meal.

Jon stopped eating to stare at his littlest sister. Sansa dropped her fork and it clattered to the floor.

Lady Stark's head shot up and issued a short, "Arya!"

"He's not our brother," Arya pointed her knife threateningly at Jon. "And you lied to me!" That last remark was directed at Lord Stark. Their father's eyes rose and he held Arya's intimidating gaze with determination. The scar on his face crinkled with anger.

"I'll always be your brother, Arya," Jon decided to intervene. She was only a child, she didn't need to know anything further. He reached across the table and grabbed the knife from her hands. "Settle down."

"Don't tell me what to do!" Arya turned her glare on him and huffed, then tears gathered in her eyes and she was crying. "I'm not like Sansa. I want it to be real!"

The pain in her voice struck a cord in Jon's heart.

She fled the table. Lady Stark called after her but it was useless. Robb shook his head in exasperation and stood. "I'll go after her."


Lord Stark excused him with a wave of the hand. Lady Stark just looked at him, like one might look at a merman who'd just emerged from the sea.

"Father," he heard Sansa ask as he left. "I won't have to marry Jon, will I?"

Jon choked on his breath and picked up the pace of his walk, pretending not to have heard. There was a poignant silence and then Lord Stark's laughter resounded in the hall. Robb's tenor soon joined his father's. At least they have found the humor in the situation, because I have not, Jon thought.

Jon left through the easternmost door and his eyes searched the courtyard.

It took a while to trace Arya's steps. He asked one of the Tully men, who pointed him in the direction of the training yards. At the yards he asked a servant, who pointed him towards the inner castle walls, and at the gatehouse, he learned that Arya had gone to the moats. Finally, at the moats, he found her huddled against Riverrun's massive walls, throwing rocks into the water near the footbridge.

Jon sat down her side. She tried to jump to her feet but Jon grabbed her, knowing if she got away she'd run even further. She struggled against his grip, fists beating against his arms and crying anew. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" and Jon almost laughed because he had not yet said anything.

Eventually, when she gave up struggling against his arms, he pulled her into an embrace.

"I will always be your brother. Forever, Arya."

Arya punched him in the stomach, but he felt her go slack in his arms.

"Whether you like it or not."

"Do you promise?" Arya said into his stomach. "You have to promise. It's no good if you don't promise and then go back on your word."
"I promise," Jon said.

"Promise me again."

"I promise."

Arya spent the night at his side. She fell asleep under the stars and he carried her to her room. Jeyne Poole showed him the way. Arya's arms and legs dangled uselessly every which way, and she smacked him once in her sleep, mumbling to herself. Jon smiled and laid her down underneath blue blankets.

"Goodnight, little sister," he kissed her brow and closed the curtains.

Jon lingered in the doorway to Arya's quarters, arms crossed, thinking.

With Arya and Sansa safe in Riverrun, he had altered the events of the war significantly. The North held Jaime Lannister captive, and the Lannisters held no one. Lord Stark was alive—he sported a new scar and heavy limp—but he was alive. The limp might lessen with time, Jon hoped and his father—Uncle, he corrected himself—even managed to save the ancestral greatsword Ice from the clutches of the enemy.

Ice would play a critical role in the war to come, Jon knew. All Valyrian steel would be of paramount importance when the Others came from beyond the Wall. Sweetsinger would not suffice—Jon needed Longclaw, or dragonglass, soon. Thoros told him that the Free Cities were once colonies of the Valyrian empire. Valyrian steel could be more common in Myr or Volantis. Procuring a sword might be possibly in those cities closest to the lands of Valyria.

*My birth father's ancestors*, Jon realized with a shudder.

It was strange to think he might share blood with those of Valyrian descent. It was unnatural. Jon likened it to the feeling of wearing another man's skin.

*Rhaegar Targaryen's skin*, Jon looked down at his right hand. *The lines of his palm might have resembled mine, as they grasped a sword, as they held my mother.*

Arya tossed and turned in her sleep, whimpering, and Jon was shaken from those disturbing thoughts. Nymeria was gone again. The large she-wolf had run out the gate and returned to the wild within an hour of their arrival. Although the beast loved Arya, Jon did not think the direwolf would remain tame for long. On that day, Arya would lose another friend. It was a shame.

Jon briefly wondered if Arya possessed some warg abilities. If so, she might be able to call on the wolf in time of need.

*When she's a little older*, Jon thought.

Ghost had never entered Riverrun. Jon had bid him remain in the woods. *He may not board the ship to Essos*, Jon thought disparagingly. It would be a shame to leave the direwolf behind, but Jon could not deny the direwolf his nature. Naturally, Ghost might have some trepidations about boarding another wooden ship. Especially after the journey to King's Landing. The white wolf had not enjoyed the sea.

"I was wondering when we would meet," a simpering voice interrupted his thoughts.

_Lord Varys._ Jon felt a cold fury wash over him at the sound of Varys' placating voice. He closed the
door to Arya's room silently, praying she did not wake.

"I did not wonder," Jon said scathingly, turning to face the Master of Whispers. "Our meetings have always been at your convenience. I need only wait for you to appear."

"I am saddened you think so little of me. I do try to be considerate of others."

Lord Varys gestured for him to follow. Jon trailed after the perfumed eunuch. The man made no sound, not even the whisper of cloth on cloth. Slippered feet moved noiselessly over polished tile. Jon followed at a distance. Down some stairs, past the gardens and to a small balcony overlooking the courtyard.

It was evening, so the braziers had been lit, as well as several tall candelabras. A table had been set with a pot of tea, bread, fresh fruit, and nuts from the forest. Marbled cups sat opposing one another, one inset with sapphire and the other, with rubies. Jon wondered if the glasses were part of Lord Varys' personal set. A game of cyvasse had also been readied. The players faced one another on a silent battlefield. Jon's eyes washed over the dragon and the wolf.

Jon sat in front of the ruby teacup.


"One that does not place my back to the door," Jon replied.

Lord Varys poured a generous cup of tea for his guest, but Jon did not drink. Truthfully, he feared it would be laced with some truth serum, or worse, poison. Thoros had advised him that the Spider was well versed in the art of magic and potions.

"I do not poison my victims, Jon," Lord Varys simpered and smiled. "I prefer for them to poison themselves. Revenge is so much sweeter that way, don't you agree?"

Jon did not speak, nor did he drink the tea. The Spider would speak first, he had decided.

"My dear boy," Lord Varys sighed and began. His voice mirrored the same false sympathy Jon had heard the night before. "If I had only known… If I had heard a whisper of your true identity, I would have done much the same as Lord Stark. I would have secreted you away in the night wrapped in the safety of a lie, as I have done for others. Only I would not have named you a bastard. Only I would have told you the truth."

Jon's nostrils flared in anger.

"And why," Jon replied, leaning forward. "Why should I believe a word you say?"

"Because, Jon Snow. It was I who helped plot the escape of Daenerys and Viserys Targaryen."

Jon hid his surprise at Lord Varys' strange and bold declaration. Thoros had said the Spider had a hand in every war, but Jon had not imagined the eunuch's duplicity to extend so far. Another ploy to earn my trust? The Spider had no honor.

*It matters not*, Jon's hand clenched into a fist, *I care nothing for the family I've never known.*

"I share no kinship with the Targaryens," Jon said evenly, attempting not to reveal how disturbing it was to think himself tied to the royal family. "You lied to me and you stole from me. How do you respond to these accusations?"
"Oh, I'd nearly forgotten." Lord Varys slipped a hand inside his sleeve and produced the stack of letters from the night before. He placed them in front of Jon. "I made copies, of course, for my own reference. But here are the originals for your edification."

Jon glanced down at the worn parchment but did not reach for them, wary of appearing too eager.

"A necessary evil, I'm afraid," Lord Varys continued, sighing. "You had to be made aware of your destiny if you are to fulfill it."

*Destiny. Thoros used the same word.*

Jon chose to remain silent. Lord Varys was too much a mystery to place any truth in his words. Too foreign. Too unusual.

"Why did you assist my father?" Jon inquired.

"I aim to serve the realm," Lord Varys opened his hands wide and gestured to the open air. "As I always have."

"You want me to do something for you," Jon said brusquely. "Serve you."

"I do."

Jon waited.

Lord Varys folded his hands under his sleeves, his expression suddenly serious and grave. "Your Aunt is a thousand leagues away, across the sea. Alone, in the red waste, and surrounded by memories of her dead husband. Rumors have reached me. Rumors of stone eggs grown warm. Rumors of what she might hatch in the fire."

*Dragons,* Jon thought. *Creatures of fire and chaos. A symbol of the times to come.*

"I see that look on your face, and I've heard the whispers you've shared with Thoros of Myr, in the dead of night when you thought no one is listening. You know what she holds."

Jon's face betrayed nothing. He did not dare breathe. Birds chirped innocently in the canopy of the trees. An innocent sound to contrast the brutality of the creatures they alluded to.

"What do you know?" Jon asked. *From stone,* he recalled Thoros' prophecy.

"I know what you know, which is to say… I know. Oh! I love riddles."

"Enough games," Jon snapped. He felt his face heat with anger. "Always you prevaricate. We are talking of dragons."

Lord Varys tittered and clapped his hands. "You are a delightful combination of both Stark and Targaryen, Jon Snow. A delightful combination."

Jon refrained from storming off the balcony. The Lord of Whispers was mysteriously serious one minute, and a laughing fool the next. A curious amalgam of a lord and a jester. Foolish enough, perhaps, to lower the defenses of overweening lords, but Jon refused to fall prey to such theatrics. Beneath Lord Varys flamboyant personality lay the fangs of a poisonous Spider, and Jon had seen it.

"And what do you want from me?" Jon asked. "What do I have to do with Daenerys Targaryen's dragons?"
"I think that relation has already been established, but I can explain it to you plainly, if you like," Lord Varys quirked a brow. "I want you to go to Essos. Find Daenerys Targaryen and bring her home. Bring the dragons to Westeros to fight your Others."

_The Others_, Jon's eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

"You care nothing for the fate of the Night's Watch," Jon replied. "The North, or the demons that dwell there. You want this for yourself, for your own benefit."

"I do," Lord Varys nodded. "For everyone's benefit. In the coming years, this land will be torn apart as the Great Houses feud with each other over the world's ugliest throne. I know it. You know it. Bring the true power back into these lands, Jon Snow. Unite Westeros under one banner. One banner. One army. One true enemy."

Jon wondered what the capitol looked like with red and black banners drifting above the ramparts. Lord Varys' proposal was not only tempting, it was also a sound argument. The Seven Kingdoms would never survive a war with the Others if they continued to remain divided and fractured. By the time of Jon's first death, the North had already been ravaged, and the Southern kingdoms were nearly collapsed after a three year war that burnt the countryside and swallowed the grain reserves.

_A unified front_, Jon thought. _If only such a dream could be reality._

"King Stannis is the rightful ruler of the Seven Kingdoms," Jon finally said, instead of voicing his thoughts.

"Stannis is a hard man. A sharp sword. He will divide these lands. Renly would divide these lands, and the Lannisters already have. There is only one answer, Jon Snow."

_Snow!_ Jon jumped, startled. _Snow! Snow!_ Lord Varys' head swiveled until he found the intruding crow perched on the railing of the balcony.

"Shoo! Shoo!" the Master of Whispers stood and waved his hands, but Jon was frozen in his seat. _Snow! Snow!_ The crow cawed twice more and then took off towards the trees. Jon watched it circle round and land on a low hanging branch. It strutted back and forth, ruffling its feathers, and then it turned it's elegant nose towards where Jon was sitting.

Black eyes bore into his own. Jon felt a shiver travel down his spine. _That crow_, he thought, his mind reeling. _Snow_, it said. _Did the Spider not hear it?_ 


"Pests," Lord Varys sat back down and folded his hands. He surveyed Jon with a critical eye. "Swear you will do it. On your honor, Jon of House Targaryen and Stark."

Jon hesitated. He could not take his eyes off the crow. It was watching him.

"For your honor, Jon Snow. For all of Westeros. For the men, the women, and the children."

_It is not a lie, only a half-truth_, he argued to himself, finally pulling away from the crow. _A white lie for the greater good._

"I swear," Jon swallowed thickly. "I swear on my honor. I will bring dragons to Westeros."

A moment passed. Varys was perhaps stunned that Jon Snow had acquiesced so quickly to his
request. The Master of Whispers stared vacantly back, a pleased smile gracing his face.

"Excellent!" Lord Varys clapped his hands. "Not as painful as you'd thought it'd be?"

Jon did not respond. The crow flapped away, leaving him feeling hollow.

"Ah, the stoic, as always. I trust you will complete this task, Jon Snow. For the good of the realm." Varys tapped the stack of letters between them. "I've included a letter of introduction that you may present to Daenerys. Happy journeys, my lord. And perhaps, on the way, you might find some reward in the journey. New friends? Perhaps… a new family?"

Lord Varys rose his eyebrows and Jon narrowed his eyes.

"If that is all, my lord?" Jon rose. "I have business to attend to before my departure."

"That is all, Jon Snow. That is all."

Jon took the letters.
Chapter Notes

A/N Opinions on the 'ship for this story? Thinking of going a new direction. Regardless, romance shall not be the central focus of the story.

Short chapter. End of an arc and all.

The morning of Jon's departure dawned cold and rainy. The Sept bells rang, the birds sang, and the evening patrols rotated with their morning counterparts. A day like any other. But not for Jon, and not for the North. Today, Jon Snow would leave the land of Westeros for the first time in either of the two lives he'd led so far. He would leave, possibly forever.

Jon woke before the sun and broke his fast. Alone, in his rooms, he pored over a map of the Riverlands and counted the leagues until their destination. The sky was still dark, and unable to do anything but pace and think, he left for the stables to prepare his tack for the journey. As Lord Commander he had never saddled a horse—that was Satin's job—but Jon the Bastard and Jon the Recruit had saddled hundreds without complaint. He looked forward to the mindless work. Anything to take his mind off the long road ahead.

At Lord Stark's request, the Blackfish had granted Jon and his companions three of Riverrun's fastest horses, thoroughbreds skilled at crossing country. Jon found them stabled near the Stark family horses, well-fed, watered and groomed. Jon chose the speckled grey stallion for himself, assuming Thoros might have a penchant for the red-brown filly, and Sam would prefer the mild-mannered white mare.

Jon heaved a brown leather saddle atop the stallion's back and brooded.

Last night, in a secret meeting of lords, Edmure Tully conveyed that the Riverland lords had lost contact with Maidenpool. Both Lord Robb—as he was referred to now—and Lord Edmure suspected the Lions to have sacked the town. Edmure took the initiative and wrote ahead to secure passage for Jon, Sam and Thoros across the Twins. Although the Maester had sent the raven posthaste, in the dead of night, it was expected to reach Lord Frey only a mere day before their arrival, but the Blackfish seemed confident that Jon and his company would survive the Twins unharassed.

From the Twins, Jon would travel to White Harbor. Lord Manderly would hopefully spirit their company across the Shivering Sea. Lord Stark had written a raven, stamped with the seal of the direwolf, and given Jon a separate letter in case the bird was felled. All of these machinations were orchestrated through the combined efforts of Lord Stark, Robb, and the Blackfish. Jon was grateful, but embittered.

It doesn't feel right. It is dishonest, Jon thought darkly. To steal away during dawn's hush, when the world's on the brink of a war. A war that will change the face of Westeros forever. Jon knew. He'd lived it before. Once, a long time ago.
He haltered the stallion, taking care to adjust the bit and the length of the reins to his preference.

Today, he would leave the only family he's ever known. Willingly. The first time he left the Starks, he left to join the Night's Watch. A twisted sense of honor had been leading him, not knowing what the Night's Watch had become over the many years. The first time, he thought he'd left as a service. He would serve the realm and serve the North and serve his brothers. It had not been service, Jon realized later, it had been a sacrifice.

*And now, I flee,* Jon thought and frowned. *To Essos.*

Once his belongings were secure, Thoros appeared at the stable entrance and greeted him with a cheerful nod and a good morning. Sam came last, yawning and carrying an apple for each of their mounts.

"What's in that sack?" Thoros poked at Sam's belongings with a curious gaze. Sam blushed and grabbed at the bulky satchel.

"Oh, just a f-few things. Books, mostly."

"The extra weight will tire your mount," Thoros said disapprovingly. "You're heavy enough."

Sam flushed. Jon gave Thoros a quelling look.

"J-Jon wants me to have them," Sam protested. "I swear. I'm just b-b-borrowing! I'll return them when I'm finished!"

"B-b-borrowing?" Thoros threw his head back and laughed. "Ah! Samwell Tarly, the book thief!"

"I'm not a thief."

"No, you're a b-b-borrower."

Jon's stoic expression cracked and he allowed himself a half-smile.

"Sam has taken those books at my request," Jon intervened and handed the red priest his reins. "They contain important information we may one day find useful."

Sam nodded his thanks. Thoros looked at his master with a questioning gaze. *Dragons,* Jon mouthed in explanation and the Red Priest's eyes brightened with understanding.

Jon was the first to lead his mount to the bailey. The gates to Riverrun had been opened and the Starks gathered in the early morning light to say their goodbyes to the now royal bastard, Jon Snow. Jon was somewhat surprise at the official fanfare, but noticed Lord Stark was not among the company.

Robb approached first and pulled him into a short, but fierce embrace. "Goodbye, brother. Winterfell's gates will be open to you, when you return."

Jon nodded, the words stuck in his throat. They pulled apart and gazed upon each other one last time. He was grateful for those few, simple words.

Next, Sansa wished him a safe journey. Jon embraced her loosely.

"Farewell, Sansa," Jon whispered in her red hair.

"Thank you for saving Jeyne," she said, quiet as a mouse, "and Arya."
Catelyn Stark looked at him with dispassionate red eyes and parroted her daughter's farewell. Jon replied with the usual platitudes and moved on quickly.

"I'll find you!" Arya tackled him. Her arms wrapped tightly around his waist and she shook like a leaf. "When the war is over, I'll find you and protect you from stupid Joffrey and stupid Stannis, and we'll live in Winterfell together. You and me."

"We will," Jon replied and kissed the top of her head.

Jon released his littlest sister and scanned the courtyard for Lord Stark, but saw no sign of his once-father. His throat constricted. A sharp pain stabbed at his heart. Turning to hide his distress, he all but leapt onto his mount. The horse stamped and pawed the ground in anticipation.

A calloused and weathered hand grasped the leather reins.

"Did you mean to leave this behind?" Lord Stark held out the red cloak Jon had stolen from the winter rose chest.

Jon's eyes flitted from Eddard Stark's grey eyes, to the Targaryen sigil he held. The fabric had been folded such that the three headed-dragon lay imposingly on top, proudly screeching for anyone to see.

Was he mad?

Jon instinctively leaned away from the tattered red banner, unsettled by the image. The Targaryen sigil in equal parts disgusted and awed him. A legendary family. A horrific end. A name both revered and despised. Jon could not bear to accept such a gift.

"You may not love him, and you may never." Lord Stark said, sympathetically. "But she loved you. And she gave you this after she gave you life. You would regret leaving it behind."

She loved you. Lord Stark had said, the night before last, on the steps of Riverrun's throne.

Lyanna. All I ever wanted. To Jon's eternal shame, unshed tears welled in his eyes. My mother.

Decision made, Jon's hand wavered as he reached for the tattered cloak. Pulling it onto his lap, the red fabric spilled over the sides of his saddle. Black and red and grey and black.

"Thank you..." Jon said, voice shaking. "Father."

Without a second glance, he kicked his stallion into action. Behind him, he heard Thoros and Sam's mounts thunder forward. Sam yelped in surprise.

They passed beneath the gate and onto the road that would take them through the Riverlands. A heavy lump formed in his throat. Jon clutched the red fabric in his hands. It trailed after him. A red streak, similar to the red comet that lingered faintly in the sky.

A heavy fog had settled across the lands. Thoros shouted from behind that mist was an auspicious sign. The fog would cover their progress, and make their tracks more difficult to discern.

Jon was grateful for the fog for another reason, because if he could not see, he could not look back. And Jon did not want to look back. Not at his past. He no longer wished to dwell on his time as Lord Commander, nor his time at King's Landing, nor Winterfell and the shattered childhood he left behind.
Lyanna, my mother.

Jon galloped over the road, leaving Sam and Thoros far behind. A nearly full grown Ghost sprinted at his side, eager to keep pace with his master.

Jon did not regret murdering Qhorin Halfhand. He did not regret lying with Ygritte. He did not regret riding South for King's Landing with Lady Stark. Jon did not regret taking the winter rose chest and the letters within. But as he left Riverrun, and Westeros by extension, he clung to one remorseful thought. The only regret he'd ever carry.

I should have visited the crypts.
A purple-sailed ship glided into the bay of Braavos as the sun began to set, illuminating the sky in pleasant pinks, oranges, and violets. Jon stood at the gangway of the Bloody Ram, holding the chain collar of Ghost in one hand and his small sack of belongings in the other.

Jon had never been at sea before—at least, never for so long—and he'd grown to appreciate the isolation. The quiet mornings, the steady work, and the silent companionship. The short trip from White Harbor to King's Landing, and from King's Landing to Maidenpool seemed a century ago. The long dark of night, the creak of the helm, the spray of the ocean waves. It was all Jon had known for the past several months.

Jon had witnessed the fury of a storm squall. He felt fear at the sight of a rogue wave growing larger on the horizon. He thought he'd die at sea. He thought himself the only man left alive. And yet, time after time, the sunrise would appear after countless hours of darkness. An explosion of color and beauty that left Jon speechless.

It reminded him of Ygritte, and the brief kiss they'd shared at the top of the Wall.

Of course, the food could have been better, as Thoros often reminded him. So too, did Sam. Jon could only laugh at their grumbling. A rare, honest laugh. His face had hurt at the sensation and Jon realized he hadn't laughed fully in weeks, months even. His thoughts had been preoccupied by the ache of betrayal in his chest, and the image of Rhaegar Targaryen. The Prince stood before him in his dreams. Staring, staring, staring with violet eyes. Jon hated his eyes. So knowing, so knowledgeable, when Jon knew nothing and always would.

Ghost had been a constant comfort, pawing and waking Jon whenever the dreams grew too vivid. For most of the journey, Ghost had been relegated to a cage in the ship's hold. Many of the crewman and the Captain had refused to entertain the notion of a direwolf on deck. But seeing Ghost's misery, Jon negotiated time and again to release the wolf. The Captain finally agreed on the condition that Jon would restrain his companion bodily, with a collar and leash.

The collar was a struggle. At first, Jon used leftover rope from the mainsail, but the direwolf chewed through the offending restraint within seconds. Next, he tried leather, and that lasted a day and a half before it too was destroyed. Jon had almost given up when the Captain found an old length of chain in the hold. Jon fastened it around the direwolf's neck and the wolf tried to break it, but to no avail. The chain was accepted, and Ghost nearly broke his arm climbing into the sun when he was finally allowed on deck.

Now, the direwolf stared at the nearing land with hunger.

Thoros stood to Jon's right, peeling one of the last apples with a knife. The Red Priest had saved it
for just this occasion. Jon wondered about the older knight's fascination with apples. Once Thoros had found the precious fruit, he'd taken to coveting them, and threatened to gut whoever dared steal an apple from the "Flaming Sword of Westeros".

Jon had stolen three.

Thoros pointed with his knife to the approaching land mass. The ship passed a large stone outcropping attached to a narrow peninsula. Large bronze and green letters were fastened onto the rock. Jon's eyes swept across the words "RAGMAN'S HARBOR" before they sailed past. On the back of the rock, near the surface of the water, someone had written in rust-colored paint—possibly blood—"Valar Morghulis".

"All men must die," Thoros said cryptically.

Their vessel approached the harbor. Jon observed the goings-on of the city from afar. Braavos was large and flat, with many different canals and many more ships and small boats traversing the waters. Jon stopped counting bridges, stone and wooden alike, after he'd reached fifty. He'd never seen such labyrinthine architecture. Every street and alley was attached to another in a massive maze set overtop the water.

The sun would set in less than an hour, by Jon's guess, and the sea traffic was busier than King's Landing's and White Harbor combined.

The captain of the ship began to shout orders in rapid sequence and the crew danced in synchrony. Ghost pulled at his collar and leash more vigorously now, and Jon felt a twinge of pain shoot down his arm.

"Have you ever been to Braavos before, Ser Thoros?" Jon asked as the red priest drifted to his side. Together, they watched the gangplank slowly lower, and then the crew—distracted by the barge of a courtesan—let it brush against the stone port with little care.

"No, never," Thoros replied and scanned the passing crowd beyond the ship. The knight's hand drifted down to the sword strapped to his side. "Let's hope none of us has a contract."

"A contract?" Jon turned to his sworn sword.

"A contract on our lives, Jon Snow," Thoros said knowingly. "In Braavos, the Sealord may govern lords and merchants alike, but the people know of a greater power that dwells in the depths of the House of Black and White. The Faceless Men who deal out death. Assassins," Thoros whispered, eyes darting left and right. "Sometimes employed by the Iron Bank. Sometimes noblemen and lords from faraway lands. The order of the Faceless men are nigh undetectable to the untrained eye."

Jon recalled Tycho Nestoris, a thin stick of a man, who seemed humble and agreeable. Jon the Commander had negotiated with the Iron Bank, to use the ambassador's ship and borrow a sum of money. The Night's Watch had needed food to survive the upcoming winter. Tycho had been astute, but overall, harmless. Especially after a few glasses of wine. A bargain was struck rather agreeably. Too agreeably? Jon reflected.

Jon had known the Iron Bank was notorious for dispatching unfavorable allies, but he hadn't known they employed a league of underground assassins.


"We should come up with a word," Sam interjected, appearing from nowhere. Jon's friend was clutching his belongings possessively, and Jon observed the distinctive shape of square books
underneath the canvas. The books Sam had stolen (or "borrowed" as Sam would say) from Riverrun's library. Books originally on loan by Tyrion Lannister.

"A word?" Thoros repeated, and furrowed his brow. "What word?"

"A w-word to say, so we know it's one of us and not anyone else." Sam looked down and scuffed his feet against the wooden deck. "Like... weirwood."

"Weirwood?" Thoros smirked.

"There's no trees in the city, no one's likely to say much about w-weirwoods. I don't think they even exist on this side of the Narrow Sea." Sam shrugged.

"Weirwood it is," Jon murmured and nodded, thinking of the heart trees of the North. "I agree."

Thoros chuckled mirthlessly and popped the last of his apple in his mouth. "If it comforts you, son of Tarly," he said with a full mouth. "We shall say your word."

A tall, thin man dressed in red and gold shoved past the working crew on the gangplank and stomped onto deck. He caressed the large board proudly propped against his stomach. On top of the board, small wooden holders contained a bottle of ink, a lit candle, and a collection of brightly colored feather pens. A scribe of some sort, Jon thought.

The man, whom the Captain greeted as "inspector", quickly took notice of Ghost and approached Jon.

"Ah, have you brought a gift for the Sealord?" The man wiggled his wiry mustache and looked down at Ghost with an austere eye. "It is hairy, I will admit, but more hairy than the dancing bears? Does it entertain? Does it do any tricks?"

Jon shook his head 'no' and the man tsked.

"Captain, Captain... I am not certain you will win Ferrego's favor with this one—ah!" the inspector jumped. Ghost had snapped at the man's intruding hand as he attempted to pet the direwolf. "Oh-ho! Well, it certainly is fearsome. Will it howl on command? Perhaps devour a small animal? Very good, very good. Off you go. One albino... ah... massive wolf. But you must go wilder, Captain! Wilder and funnier..."

Jon had no desire to remain on deck with the obnoxious 'inspector' so he grasped Ghost's collar and exchanged a glance with Thoros and Sam. The inspector's voice grew distant as Jon led Ghost down the gangplank and onto the street. Thoros followed him closely, bedecked in his unusually vibrant red, and Sam came last, huffing and puffing, clutching his pack to his chest.

The Captain had recommended an affordable and popular inn for foreigners, Moroggo's, which offered free nightly entertainment that Sam greatly looked forward to. After a brief discussion, the trio headed for the inn, stopping once to ask for directions from a kindly old man with a cane.

At first glance, Jon thought Braavos was a peculiar city, though he hadn't much knowledge of cities to compare it justifiably. The only city he'd ever known was Winterfell, which was more fortress than town, and more recently, King's Landing, where the rich lived ostentatiously and the poor fought for food scraps and clean water. Braavos seemed to be neither a fortress, nor riddled with great inequality.

The people were a strange mixture of many cultures, and all of them bold. In the midst of a growing crowd, a fighter in flamboyant colors shouted for his sword. An orphan swiped a merchant's
coinpurse and was pursued by guards. An old woman stood hunched over on the dockside, spinning tales of each passerby's fortune. Upon sighting the large direwolf, she froze and half fainted, shouting, "The darkness! The darkness!" Jon and his company hurried past.

Ghost's head bobbed left and right. The direwolf panted heavily with excitement, invigorated by the strange sounds and the scent of food. After a moment of debate, Jon loosed the leash and he was off, chasing cats down a narrow alley. Sam looked at him incredulously but Jon shook his head and said, "He'll be back."

Jon squinted his eyes, looking for any sign of the inn. It was growing difficult to see in the growing fog and misty rain and the constant bustling crowd set his nerves on edge.

Seeing the sky darken, many merchants and tavern keepers began to hang brightly colored lanterns outside their shop doors. Jon thought the evening chill and the dark might drive the crowds indoors, but he was wrong. *A Braavosi night is not used for sleeping,* Jon thought, as he, Thoros and Sam continued to weave through a sea of activity.

The door to Moroggo's was painted pink and black with accents of white swirls. The lanterns above the inn were lit with a strange blue fire, thankfully, otherwise Jon might never have seen the entrance.


In the common room, Thoros and Jon shared a flagon of ale. The innkeeper's wife brought them two bowls of brown stew, a half loaf of sweet bread, and a plate of cheese. Thoros ate and drank heartily but Jon was brooding.

It had been five days and neither Jon, nor Thoros, nor Sam had heard any word of Daenerys or her dragons. Jon had taken to rotating sitting at the local inns and taverns—always with Thoros—eavesdropping on gossip or hastily spoken whispers but all he heard were spun tales, too grand to trust. Jon was frustrated. He hadn't known what to expect in Braavos, but it seemed the free city was nearly as isolated as the Night's Watch.

Sam left earlier in the day to find a ship headed north, towards Eastwatch by the sea. His journey to the Night's Watch could no longer be delayed. Jon had asked if he wanted company, but Sam insisted on going alone.

"Tarly will be fine," Thoros said, a few minutes after Sam's departure. "He's a man grown, he can handle himself."

"He's too smart," Jon replied. "And not so, at times. He does not know how he angers people."

"And it's your job to look after him, hmm?" Thoros peered at him over his large mug of ale. "Protective older brother, are you?"

Jon stamped down a retort and changed the subject. "A week we've been in Essos—"

"You can count."

Jon glared. Thoros had a strange knack for interrupting him before he could fully finish a thought. *A sport the knight enjoys indulging in,* Jon thought. Thoros returned his angry look with a mirthful smirk.

"We've no news of Daenerys, or her dragons," Jon said and leaned back against the inn's walls.
"It will come, with time. Rumors are all we have, and rumors we shall hunt."

"Perhaps we should move on," Jon said, more to himself than Thoros. "Some speak of a silver bride sold to a Khal of the Grass Sea. 'Tis all we have."

"Aye," Thoros agreed, spitting into his empty cup with distaste. "I've heard the same. Some say Khal Drogo became the living dead, and she perished in a great fire. Others yet, swore she turned into a giant bird and took off in the night, to forever haunt the Red Waste... we know not for certain. The Dothraki sea is a long way away, and these rumors could be naught more than the vast exaggeration of a woman's beauty."

"The Red Waste is a death sentence," Jon shook his head somberly, "and the Dothraki sea is deadly. We cannot go forward to divine the truth. And yet, I do not wish to remain in Braavos for long. We cannot stay here."

A longing, buried deep in his heart, emerged resurgent. The longing to return to Westeros. Braavos was a captivating province, an amalgam of culture. Jon could admit he was initially fascinated by the iconic sword fighting Braavosi, but Jon's fascination soon dwindled, outpaced by his desire to return to normalcy. To return to the cold of the North, and the quiet, steady pulse of Winterfell.

A place I may no longer be welcome, Jon thought.

"You are right, we should not linger," Thoros inclined his head. "Patience, I urge you, my Prince—"

Jon winced.

"—Every day brings new mysteries, and every night new answers."

"Have you seen something?" Jon asked, somewhat reluctantly. "In the flames? An arcane message of some sort?"

"Braavos and crows," Thoros replied, turning his eyes toward the lanterns lining the walls. "Always Braavos and crows. And mountains and seas. And somewhere, it snows in the desert. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No," Jon pinched the bridge of his nose, barely listening. "Crows are what the Free Folk called the Night's Watch. Crows."

"And you, have you seen anything?" Thoros inquired, leaning forward curiously. Dark ale splashed carelessly out of his drinking horn and Jon shook his head.

"No..." Jon lied. "I see nothing."

Jon stood at the top of the Wall, heavy black furs protected him from a strong northwesterly wind. The former Lord Commander looked down from on high as blue-eyed creatures with parchment skin and blackened bones scratched and clawed at the base of the wall. Crooked skeletal fingers reached towards him, bodies crawled over one another, desperately attempting to climb the great divide.

Stannis was beside him, tall and dark and armored. Melissandre's bright sword glowed in his hand.

"I cannot feel it's warmth," Maester Aemon said. Jon turned and his eyes widened. Aemon was here, standing beside him, slightly hunched over in his old age. Jon grasped the bony prominence of the elderly man's shoulder. The Maester's blind eyes cleared, and Jon felt the breath leave his body. And then Maester Aemon's eyes glowed, first red, then gold, and then they caught fire and Jon yelped,
reeling backwards.

"Do not be afraid, Jon Snow. Fire cannot harm a dragon."

And then the Maester was gone, swept away in the cold winds. Jon turned to search for Stannis again, but the King had disappeared. Jon was alone again. Underneath him, the ice began to crack and falter, his feet slid as the Wall crumbled to his left. A roaring filled his ears and he closed his eyes.

When they opened, Jon was in the cave. Ygritte was laying beside him, one arm pillowed under her head and red hair spilling onto his shoulder. "I don't want to leave this cave, Jon Snow. Let's stay here, and hide forever."

"Yes…" Jon said, relieved. The wall was gone. It was only him and Ygritte. He lay back down and stared at the crystalline ceiling of the cave. "Let's stay here forever."

But even as he said the words, a voice in the back of his mind roared in protest.

"Where are we?" Jon asked, after another moment passed and Ygritte's breathing slowed.

"Home…" Ygritte said. "Where we've always been."

Home… Jon thought of a large stone castle, a white weirwood, tall towers and arched bridges.

"No," he sat up despite the cold. "We can't stay here. We have to warn them, Ygritte!" He tried to shake her awake but she wasn't moving. "Ygritte! Wake up! We have to warn them, Ygritte!"

Blood pooled underneath the back of her head and her eyes unfocused. Ygritte's body was cold to the touch and Jon knew she was dead. A feathered arrow stuck out of her chest. One, two—no, three arrows pierced her heart and lungs. A rustling sound echoed in the cave and Jon turned around in fear. Jeor Mormont's stern face scowled above him.

"You broke your vows, Snow."

Snow, snow, snow! The raven on his shoulder cawed. Jon stood up, naked, Longclaw in his hand. Only it wasn't Longclaw, but another blade. A blade that emitted an unnatural light, and a warmth that melted the snow.

"I had no choice!" Jon replied. "The Halfhand—"

"Not that vow." Mormont's skin was melting, and the teeth of his skull were now visible through his cheeks. "I am the fire that burns against the cold."

The cave began to shake, Jon stumbled backwards as blue eyes came to life in the darkness. He turned and ran. A coward, Jon was a coward in his dreams.

"The light that brings the dawn."

The sword let out a burst of light, and Jon cast it aside as it burned his hands. He burst out of the cave and into the snow. Shards and broken pieces of the Wall jutted out from the ground around him. The crumbled remains of Castle Black were almost indistinguishable. Amidst the ruins, Jon saw the former tops of the King's Tower, the broken remains of the walkway, the chains of the winch.

The Wall. Jon gaped, open mouthed. The Wall had fallen. A large gap had formed, three hundred feet wide, in the place where Castle Black once stood. The South was exposed and nothing stood in
the way of the army of wights. Beyond the masses of fur laden corpses the Others rode dead horses and ice spiders.

And then it was quiet. Deathly quiet.

Jon woke with a shout.

"OY!" Thoros jolted awake and unsheathed the dagger from under his pillow. The red priest was on his feet prowling the room, looking left and right. "What danger?!"

Jon wiped the sweat from his brow with a trembling hand. "None," he said hoarsely. "None but in a dream."

"A dream." Thoros sniffed and sheathed his dagger. "It disturbed you."

Jon waved his hand. He did not wish to speak of the dead. A nightmare like any other. Jon let loose a shuddering breath and flung his legs over the side of the cot.

"Nothing of consequence," Jon said dismissively.

Whether or not the red priest believed his "prince", Jon would never know. Thoros flung his red cloak over his shoulder and strapped on his large longsword. With a bow, he turned to leave the room, muttering about breakfast and crows.

Sam blinked blearily and watched the priest go with a solemn expression.

"I don't think he likes me," Sam commented sleepily. "He nevers talks to me."

"It's not you, Sam." Jon sighed and searched their belongings.

Sam, Thoros and Jon still shared a single room at the Moroggo's Inn. It was their sixth night in Braavos, and they were no closer to discovering Daenerys' whereabouts, or a ship to ferry Sam across the Narrow Sea to Eastwatch.

Jon was beginning to resent their cramped room at the inn. Sam slept beneath the window, and Thoros had taken the space in front of the door, leaving Jon cramped in the middle. Neither Winterfell nor the Night's Watch had ever lacked so severely in space, and his rooms at the Painted Lady and Riverrun had been large enough for a lord's bastard to sleep comfortably. Here, however, in Braavos, with a coin purse that might need to catapult them across the world, Jon was forced to be miserly.

Fortunately, Jon had a multitude of experience acting as a pinchpenny before, as Lord Commander of the Night's Watch and on the road to Riverrun. He would never be known as a spendthrift, of that, Jon was certain. Unfortunately, that meant Jon had been forced to chose a veritable cupboard for their temporary residence, and comforts were few and far between.

As a result, Jon avoided their cramped quarters at all cost. Instead, he preferred the streets and the alleyways, the inns and the taverns. Everyday, their explorations took them farther and farther from Ragman's harbor and deeper into the dregs of the city.

And wherever Jon went, Thoros was sure to follow. A red shadow. Only shadows were silent and Thoros was ten times as talkative as the normal man, and without an ounce of decency when he was drunk.
The man is as brazen as they come, but at least he does not commit blood sacrifices, Jon thought cynically and pulled on his boots. The leather had almost been ruined by the salt water of Braavos' canals. He hoped the boot would not split or crack, leaving him barefoot. At least, not for another month or two.

A month or two, Jon buried his face in his hands and sighed. Will we linger in Braavos that long?

Next, Jon pulled out the red cloak his mother had given him from underneath his pillow. Every morning, he'd taken to inspecting it. On the ship to Braavos, he'd memorized every smear of dirt, every tear, every crinkle in the fabric, and even the worn down initials 'R.T.' sewn into the collar. As shocking as that discovery had been, Jon found he did not care if a dead prince once owned the red swath of fabric. His mother had swaddled him with this cloak. His mother had held him in this red fabric. His mother had loved him.

Jon ran his hand over the faded fabric. By touching it, will I grow closer to touching her? Will I know her embrace, when death comes for me the second time?

Jon looped it around his waist and shoulder in the fashion he had seen the Braavosi officials don. The black design of the three-headed dragon was barely visible in this style, and besides, Braavos was an ocean away from Westeros.

"Breakfast?" Jon asked the still groggy Sam.

"I'm looking forward to the salted pork," Sam smiled blearily. "Do you think if we pass the oyster girl again, we can get another batch? I like the butter sauce."

Jon and Sam dined quickly in the common hall and left to walk the docks soon afterwards. As was their routine. On some days, there was work unloading barges and moving cargo and it paid enough for a decent dinner. Other days, the trio would go on a run through all the inns and taverns, hoping for information on the elusive Daenerys Targaryen. Unfortunately, Braavos was like the Wall in that respect, too far North to receive news in a timely manner.

"Ah, Fat One! Dark One! Red One… Over here! Here!"

The bald, mustached inspector from their maiden voyage waved from afar and gestured for them to follow. Jon, Sam and Thoros quickly jumped to attention and fell into step behind the slightly eccentric itemizer.

"We've important items today! Very important. Trade is flourishing! Flourishing!" the inspector said with a quiver of excitement and a flick of his cloak. "A one-of-a-kind vessel from the ancient and magnificent city of Qarth."

The inspector opened his hands wide and gestured in front of them. "Manned by sixty of the strongest slaves who've bravely rebelled against their captors, risking open ocean to chase freedom! The sweet intoxication of the sea! The smell of salt water in the morning! Oh, to be young again and feel the rich thrill of adventure—"

Jon thought the ship looked rather dull in comparison to the inspector's poetry, but he observed the craft dutifully. It was a large vessel, the wood was a bleak grey and black, and where there was once gold paint, the lettering was faded and chipped. Several exhausted looking men were in the midst of climbing out of the ship's depths and stumbling onto the shore. The men were emaciated. Starved, most likely.

Not sixty men. Three. Three out of sixty had survived. Jon wondered if their freedom was worth the
death of 57 comrades.

"Qarth, you say?" Thoros said and leaned forward to whisper in Jon's ear conspiratorially. "News from the far Eastern World?"

Jon nodded discreetly in agreement.

"—Job's same as usual, you know what to do, boys—"

"We'll take the job," Thoros interjected, just as Sam and Jon were walking up the gangplank. "Honestly, man, enough of your nattering…"

Jon had never been on an oar ship. The Qartheen vessel did not compare to the Westerosi and Braavosi ships he'd seen. It was thinner and the nose tapered off to a narrow protuberance that tied into the main mast. It's many oars had been drawn in upon docking. Jon observed that most were broken or splintered.

"This ship survived the open sea?" Jon asked incredulously.

"Likely not," Thoros replied, and leapt down onto the deck. "Slave revolts are rare, but not unseen. Now, if I were a slave and I'd just murdered my captain and guards, I'd creep along the shore. Slowly. Stealthily. They were likely already near the Free Cities when they decided to seize their freedom."

Jon grabbed a box of what smelled like exotic perfumes, and handed it to Sam, who handed it to Thoros, who handed it to another man who'd smelled a possible penny on the docks that day.

"Won't the Qartheen be looking for a lost ship?" Sam grunted and hoisted another box into the red priest's arms.

"Indeed they will. These were the lucky few," Thoros said. "You've not seen slavery in Westeros…"

Jon furrowed his brow and frowned. He had not seen slavery, that much was true. Eddard Stark forbid the slave trade in the North. Lord Stark considered slavery a barbaric practice, better left in the past. The penalty was death.

Looking down the narrow walkway, along the benches where enslaved men once sat, a sickening feeling took hold. The quarters were too cramped. Broken shackles lay strew across the deck, blood stained the wood beneath them, bits of flesh still attached to the metal. Jon picked one up and held it in his hands. Not a shackle, a collar. Jon was repulsed and dropped the offending device.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jon detected a slight movement.

A bony figure sat hunched under the remains of the ship's rudder handle. The man's body curled inwards, skeletal hands clutched the tattered rags around his midsection. Not a shackle, a collar. Jon was repulsed and dropped the offending device.

"... Myr calls itself a free city, but has its roots in the slave trade," Thoros continued, passing along another barrel. "I saw it as a youth. In the streets, behind golden gates, beneath marble statues and Myrish glass—Oh, it's there. A festering disease. A product of a perverted mind…"

Jon set down the crate he was carrying and started forward. The man was at death's door. His hair, a matted clump at the base of his skull. His feet, black and rotting. Drawing closer, Jon realized the former slave cradled his left arm tenderly, even in his unconscious state.
"... I feared the day they would come for me. A poor boy, from a poor family. My parents never had much gold. There was not enough food to go around. In the end, it wasn't the slavers I had to fear. It was starvation..."

Jon knelt down next to the man and tapped his face gently. He unhooked the flask of water at his waist and poured a generous portion into the man's mouth. The former slave coughed and spluttered, his eyes flickered open and rested on Jon's face.

*Brown eyes, Jon noted, for some reason. Brown-gold.*

"... I sat there, on the temple steps, contemplating my gruesome fate, when a light fell upon me... quite seriously, a lamplight had broken off its stem and fell onto my shirttail. I miraculously stamped it out before the flames consumed me, and the red priestesses said it was "my calling". Ridiculous really..."

"What's your name?" Jon asked.

The man blinked and reached for the water. Jon gave it to him, and watched as the dying man consumed sucked the skin dry. Behind him, Jon heard Sam and Thoros approach.

Thoros said something in Valyrian. Jon had taken lessons with Maester Luwin, but had admittedly been a poor student of the languages.

"Hazar."

"Hazar," Jon directed the question towards Thoros. "Where are you from? Can you move? What news from the East?"

"Hazar..." and the rest was unintelligible gibberish. The man responded in a slow, rasping voice, which prompted Jon to hand him Sam's waterskin as well. The conversation continued for some time, with no translation from Thoros. Hazar was motioning with his hands, and Thoros was talking. Jon could only understand snippets of their conversation.

*I shall have to ask for lessons from Thoros, he realized, if we are planning to travel even further East, I must understand Valyrian and all its variants.*

"... dracar..."

"Dragon!" Sam said excitedly, eyes wide. "Jon, they're talking about dragons."

"Thank you, Sam," Jon said, distracted. Hazar was fading fast. The man's head was beginning to droop, and he spoke in slurred speech. He might not last. "Thoros, perhaps we should help our comrade to the tavern and pay for his meal. The rain will not do his arm any good."

"What rain?" Sam looked up towards the sky. It was overcast and dark, as per usual.

"Sooner or later, it's always raining here," Thoros mumbled and nodded. "Right."

Thoros and Sam hoisted the disheveled man to his feet. Hazar, as he was called, was unable to stand. The knight and lord's son wrapped the former slave's arms around their shoulders, and half dragged him forward. Jon cleared a path and led them down the gangway, following the bridge towards the inn.

"Thoros," Jon dropped back when the dock widened enough to allow them to pass four abreast. "What news?"
Thoros paused, eyes swiveling left and right down the dock.

"Your kin is in Qarth, my Prince, with three newly hatched dragons."

"Hey! Fat One! Dark One! Red One! No job done! No penny! No luck next time!"

Chapter End Notes

A/N Uhhh, received a lot more input than I was expecting on the whole 'ship thing. Aaaand I probably lost a lot of readers due to the delay (oops!).

Also, took some liberties with Braavos. If you've read this far, you're probably not surprised. But in case you haven't figured it out, I am just making sh*t up left and right over here.

Also also, this chapter is dedicated to Katie and Allonah.
The Night's Watch

Chapter Summary

Jon, Sam and Thoros chase rumors in Braavos. Sam departs for the Night's Watch.

Four days past since the news of Daenerys in Qarth reached Jon. Thoros and Jon spent their dreary days scouting the various harbors of Braavos for ships bound for the Jade Sea, or at least a larger port in the South. One afternoon they learned the Sealord had decided the sixty oared ship from Qarth would return to its mother city. The ship would be a gesture of goodwill between the city-nation of Braavos and the ruling Thirteen of Qarth. Jon and Thoros were the first to sign contracts as sailors for the escort ship. The expedition would last six months, and there was no guarantee of arrival.

"Jon! Jon!" Sam came rushing into the inn, hands waving emphatically.

Several patrons looked up from their dinner plates in irritation as the son of Tarly bowled past, knocking a set of pewter goblets to the floor.

"Jon, something's happened! I found a ship. I found them!"

Jon lowered the yellowed parchment pages of *Dragons and Dungeons: A History of Dragons in the Seven Kingdoms and Their Demise* by Maester Corwyn. Sam had recommended the novel for light reading. On the three-hundredth-and-fifty second page, Jon wondered when his eyes would refocus, and his head would stop pounding. He'd only just surpassed the known varieties of scale colors and skull shapes.

"Found who?" Jon sat up straight, setting the book aside gratefully. "Slow down," he added, as Sam scrambled eagerly into a chair.

"Men! Men from the Night's Watch," Sam breathed. "They'll take me to Eastwatch, but Jon—Jon you won't believe. You were right."

Jon's heart leapt to life, pounding painfully in his chest. *Men from Eastwatch by the Sea. What are they doing here? In Braavos?*

*Crows in Braavos,* Thoros' words resurfaced in the back of his mind. *Of course,* Jon thought. The knight in question had been having words with one of the inn's regulars at the center hearth. The red priest froze, his lips on the rim of a drinking horn, when Jon lifted a hand and waved him over.

"The Others, Commander Mormont… dead. Not the Others—the commander." Sam continued and then stopped to take a heaving breath. "Lord Commander Mormont was murdered in his chambers by a wight," he said rapidly. "At least, that's what one of the men from Castle Black said. Then the commander turned into a blue-eyed wight himself! And the Castle was nearly lost to th-these wights if not for Cotter Pyke! He rode from the East and retook it, but they lost half their men and the rangers are all gone—they've had no contact—and then Eastwatch was attacked by the Others—or was it the Shadow Tower? And the harbor is lost? Oh, wait. I can't remember…"

Sam trailed off, face flushed. Jon stood abruptly, head swimming with this new information. The dragons of yesterday and tomorrow completely forgotten, yellowed pages cast aside.
"Sam, take me to them. Now."

Sam nodded and spun around. Thoros grabbed Jon's arm before he could leave. Jon started, having missed the knight's approach. He'd nearly forgotten the other man was present.

"Jon, remember. These men do not know you."

Jon would never allow Thoros to see how deeply those words wounded him. The wounds on his chest and torso burned red-hot and Jon resisted the urge to rub at the offending scars. Daggers. Daggers in the night. Thoros' gaze was probing.

Jon nodded stiffly and turned to climb the stairs to their shared room. The leather of his belt felt stiff and heavy as he tightened Sweetsinger to his hip, the red Targaryen sigil covered the tall handle of his Westerosi sword, but not the long blade. Jon recalled his former Valyrian steel sword and the stern yet fatherly man who had gifted it to him.

Sam led the company down the large canal and into the dredges of the city. Jon followed blindly, his heart lodged somewhere in his throat, but still stuttering painfully. Lord Commander Mormont. The man he once proclaimed the father of the Night's Watch. Murdered.

A rush of forgotten memories returned resurgent. The wight. Othor, who's eyes had turned a bright blue. It was Ghost who first alerted Jon to the wight's reanimation, and it was pure luck and ingenious thinking on Jon's part that saved Commander Mormont's life. Jon recalled that night, long ago when he had followed the direwolf to the Commander's room and there, skulking in the shadows, clawing at the door, was a creature of the dead.

He'd thrown a lantern at it, and it burned. Jon looked down at his scarless hands in shock.

I didn't save him, not this time around.

Jon traveled South, and Ghost never alerted anyone to Othor's resurrection.


In his heart of hearts, he had hoped another would take his place. He had hoped that his presence would set forth ripples in a deep pond. He had hoped that the world would right itself. But it hadn't, and the history of the Wall was changed irrevocably.

The trio came to a halt in front of a darkened doorway, beneath a stone, salt-stained bridge. The air smelled of fish and human waste. Jon wrinkled his nose. These are likely the only accommodations the Night's Watch can afford.

The door to the tavern was rusted and squeaked noisily as Sam, Jon and Thoros entered. Jon's hands shook with unexpected nerves as he surveyed the room for his former black brothers. The stab wounds ached on his chest, and he unconsciously rubbed at the one closest to his hip. The one given to him by the northern boy—Olly. It ached the most.

The tavern was quiet. It was still early in the day, and most patrons still slumbered. Not a tavern, Jon amended his thoughts immediately, a brothel. Incense hung thick in the air as scantily dressed women served ale and food, and sat on men's laps, giggling prettily.

Jon avoided the women's gazes. He exchanged an ill-tempered look with Thoros, who—perhaps surprisingly—returned his displeasure. Glancing at Sam, the son of the lord had turned beet red and stuttered out his apologies.
"I—th-they told me their temporary residence—I didn't know, Jon."

"It's fine, Sam," Jon said gruffly. "Let's find the brothers."

Hunched in the corner of the cramped room, five men dressed in black huddled around a large fire. Sam bustled forward awkwardly, blushing and careful to avoid any accidental brushing of the limbs. Jon followed, searching the men's faces for any familiarity. One face nearly sent him reeling backwards and out the door.

*Ser Alliser*, Jon thought, his nostrils flared in anger.

The fifty-some year old man looked near seventy, with hollow, vacant eyes and a pencil thin chin and nose. The old knight's hair had turned an ashy grey, and he stared hauntingly into the distance, moving his lips yet not speaking a sound. A part of Jon was overwhelmed with pity. Only trauma and war had ever been known to age a man in such a manner.

"M-men of the Night's Watch…" Sam began in a stutter. The men looked up. "T-this is J-J-J—"

"Jon Snow," Jon opted for the truth. He had no reason to fear these brothers. The Night's Watch took no part in the wars of the realm, and he doubted they'd heard any of the troubling news from the South, or Riverrun, as of yet. "My father is Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, the Warden of the North. I parted ways with my lord and his family in Riverrun. What news from the Wall?"

The men all eyed him warily. Jon recalled the general distrust the men of the Night's Watch held for lordlings and lord's sons. *Southerners* who hadn't felt the cold, creeping chill of a long night's vigil seven hundred feet above the earth, away from the warmth of the fire and the comfort of home. *Lordlings* whose entitlement and rude condescension was salt in the wound of their suffering and starvation.

Behind him, Thoros moved noiselessly forward, hand rested on the pommel of his sword. An unspoken message of threatening support.

"Krieg," a stout man with a bushy brown beard piped up. "I was sentenced by your father."

An awkward silence descended upon the group. Jon could not resist peeking at the wiry figure of Ser Alliser, whose hunched and folded figure had not stirred.

"Well… th-that's not Jon's fault." Sam immediately jumped to Jon's defense.

Jon raised a hand and Sam clamped his mouth shut with a click. The brothers exchanged silent glances with one another. Jon expected Ser Alliser to take the lead, but the knight remained silent. The other brothers were no more forthcoming, regarding Jon with growing suspicion.

"If yer Stark's bastard, why're yeh in Braavos?" the man with a shaved head asked. Jon did not recognize him. As Lord Commander, his duty was to remain at Castle Black, and for his brief tenure he had never traveled to Eastwatch. Jon wondered if these men hailed from the Watch's sea-side castle.

"I've gone at Lord Stark's bidding," Jon replied slowly, with a twinge of guilt. *A half truth.* "My friend, Sam, has given me troubling news. I would have it confirmed."

The brothers shifted uncomfortably. None of them spoke. Jon's palms had grown sweaty. He grit his teeth in frustration.

"Tell me what happened," Jon tried once more. "And I will find a way to get word to my father. The
Starks have always been true friends of the Watch.

The brothers avoided his gaze. Jon's heart sank. It seemed they were unwilling to speak of the horrors they'd witnessed.

"Was it the Others?" Thoros asked.

Jon closed his eyes, at once grateful and disconcerted by Thoros' initiative. At least it seemed to shake the black brothers from their self-imposed isolation. Five sets of downcast eyes rose in unison, at once shocked and fearful. The outspoken man called Kraig gaped openly.

"How the fuck you—"

"Do the lords—"

"No one can help us..." Ser Alliser finally spoke in a rasp, silencing the others. Jon's head swiveled to meet the older man's iron gaze. "The world is ending."

Silence descended on the group at Ser Alliser's proclamation. A cold silence. As if all the joy and happiness in the world had dissipated, leaving behind five sad black brothers. Alliser's beady eyes focused on the former Lord Commander with startling clarity. Jon could not look away.

"How did Lord Commander Mormont die?" Jon asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"Taken... taken by one of them. The dead ones," Alliser rasped as if speech itself was a great effort. The other brothers shifted uncomfortably. "Cold... white... with black hands and blue eyes. They rose in the night and murdered at will. And where a living man fell, a dead man rose to take his place, the Commander among them. The crow pecked out his eyes, screaming dead, dead, dead. Mormont tried to eat it."

Jon's eyes grew wide with horror.

"We took 'em in. For the Maester ter study," one of the other men spoke up. He was stout, with thick arms and a full, blonde beard. "They was strange lookin', like 'em just fell and froze in the snow outside der gates. Didn't smell like dead bodies... not t'all." Jon thought he might have known him once. "Didn't smell..."

Did this man die at the Fist of the First Men? Jon thought. There was something familiar about the air of the young man in the corner, but his visage was shrouded by a thick black hood and Jon could not see past his nose.

"I led the surviving men out," Ser Alliser continued, staring unnervingly at Jon. "We broke the winch chain and rode for Eastwatch. Pyke and I gathered a force of two hundred and retook the castle with fire. Fire's the only thing that stops them. It was a bloody battle—"

"We've too few men now," one of the younger members complained. "They'll never believe us. Dead men don't walk! They'll laugh us out of Braavos."

Edd! Jon's heart leapt for joy. Dolorous Edd's thin form stood shivering in the corner. Jon would know that sullen voice anywhere. Happiness blossomed in his chest but Jon beat it down cruelly. Remember, these men do not know you. Jon loathed when Thoros was right.

"Shut your mouth!" Alliser snapped at Edd. "Always with you. Pyke's given his orders."

Edd. My friend. My brother. I knew you once, in another life. The dagger wounds burned and Jon
focused once more on his old nemesis.

"What orders?" Jon leaned forward.

"None yer business, bastard," the man named Krieg growled.

"Silence!" Alliser slammed his fist on the table. Several patrons at the next table looked over curiously and a busty woman came to refill their ales with a smile. The group fell silent as she bustled around the table. Edd grabbed at her waist but she dodged his grasp artfully. Jon almost smiled at his crestfallen expression. Almost.

"Like the fool said," Ser Alliser sneered. "We've too few men. Castle Black was abandoned. Winch cage is broken anyway and the tunnel's been filled with ice and rocks. Command has been established at Eastwatch but in the chaos, the wildlings took the Shadow Tower and now it's held by a wildling named the Weeper. I hope the dead take him," Alliser said, and spat at the ground. "Fuck the wildlings. Pyke's in charge. As soon as we get back, I'm leading the men west. I want command of that Tower."

"The North has not responded to the threat of the wildlings and wights south of the Wall?" Jon asked.

Ser Alliser threw his head back and laughed mirthlessly. It was a cold, hard laugh. Half deranged by Jon's ears. The man named Krieg snorted and swore.

"Cotter sent emissaries to each of the houses, but half came back empty handed, and the rest had only a handful of men to offer. Thieves and rapists, starved in dungeons. All the men are gone South, Snow, fighting against the Lannister bitch and her boy-King." Ser Alliser rolled his eyes skyward. "Against Stannis and Renly and who-the-fuck-knows."

"But why are you here?" Jon asked.

Krieg opened his mouth to retort, likely to tell him to fuck off, but Alliser held up a hand in mockery of Jon's earlier actions.

"The Storm Crow took us to Braavos. Cotter wants us to beg gold from the Iron Bank, to buy food for the Winter. We took as many supplies from Castle Black as we could carry, but it won't be nearly enough. We're also to ask the Sealord for recruits from his dungeons," Ser Alliser's lip curled in distaste at the task. "So, what are you going to tell your father, Bastard? What will you say? That the black brothers have lost their minds, as well as two of their most strategic towers? Will you blather of how we've failed to protect the realm? How the Wall has fallen to myths and monsters and gremlins? Well, Bastard?"

Ser Alliser folded his arms and glared at Jon. The other man averted their eyes, perhaps ashamed of their leader's disrespect. All but Krieg, who glared with equal hatred towards the son of the man who condemned him to the cold hell that is the Wall.

"None of that," Jon said. Stamping down his anger at being called "bastard" more than once. "I will only tell him as you have told me. When Stannis sits the Iron Throne, my father and brother will return North and retake the Wall."

Ser Alliser laughed again. Just as crazed. Just as mockingly.

"A fine promise, but somehow, I doubt that."

Jon's nostrils flared. "House Stark has always kept faith with the Night's Watch, and held its brothers
in high honor. Do not forget, my uncle counts amongst you."

"Your uncle has not been seen in months," Alliser replied, somewhat apologetically. "Mance Rayder attacks from the West, and the Others are drifting towards the East. We saw them on the shore, as we pushed off from the dock, riding their dead horses. It's only a matter of time before they strike again."

The news of Benjen's disappearance was no shock to Jon, but it disturbed him to know that the Others were moving freely in the North, murdering at will. Meanwhile, Lord Stark and his army of northmen would remain in the South. Would Eastwatch be strong enough to withstand an attack such as the one Castle Black endured? Without Commander Mormont, it seemed unlikely. *He wasn't suppose to die that way.*

"My father *will* answer to this threat," Jon said emphatically, pausing to gather his wits. "The North has just as much to lose should the King Beyond the Wall threaten the peace. The northern lords *will* heed your warning."

"You don't have the authority to promise that," Alliser said and shook his head. "No, we are doomed."

"If Lord Stark c-can't help you. J-Jon will." Sam said meekly from the sidelines, his shy voice almost comically demure in the midst of the tense argument between Jon and Ser Alliser.

Alliser blinked and his eyes flitted between Jon and Sam.

"A bastard can't help up," Alliser said decisively. "But if you'd be a messenger to your father, we'd be appreciative."

Jon exhaled sharply through his nostrils and gave a curt nod.

"I will relay this news to my father and brother, when I return to Westeros," Jon promised.

Ser Alliser did not speak his appreciation, but the death grip on his cloak lessened and the knight's brow unknotted. Jon was ready to state their goodbyes and farewells, when Thoros' voice drifted calmly between the two men.

"You are in the presence of no mere messenger. This is Azor Ahai, the Prince that Was Promised. It is his destiny to defeat the Great Other in the Battle for the Dawn."

Jon closed his eyes, physically pained by Thoros' words. The brothers heads rose and turned to look at the red knight in confusion.

"What rubbish is this?" Edd asked aloud. "Who's Azoo Ahi? He said his name is Jon."

Jon thought that was the most appropriate response he'd ever heard.

"It's true—"

"Sam—"

"Jon's going to bring dragons back to Westeros." Sam nodded vigorously. Jon groaned inwardly. "He'll bring them to the Wall and save us all!"

Jon angrily grabbed Sam's shoulder, strongly enough to silence him. "Enough."

"Dragons?" Ser Alliser started chuckling. "There are no dragons left in the world, and how would Ned Stark's bastard bring one to Westeros? Clearly, I can no longer trust you to relay our message
accurately. Trust a bastard to be mad."

Jon's ire rose with each passing word. He had had enough. This meeting of brothers was dissolving before his very eyes. Jon opened his mouth to retort when Thoros betrayed him again.

"This is the only living son of Rhaegar Targaryen."

Jon's hands fisted against his will.

"I'm confused," Ed jumped in. "I thought he was Lord Stark's son."

"I am Lord Stark's son," Jon interjected quickly. If he lost the Night's Watch faith now, it would be even more difficult to gain their trust in the future. "Although Lyanna Stark was my mother and Rhaegar Targaryen was my... father. I was raised as Lord Stark's son and that is all that matters. It is true that I am traveling east to meet with my aunt by blood, Daenerys Targaryen, to beg for her assistance in the war against the Others. To ask for her help. To ask her to return to Westeros."

Jon's declaration was met with silence.

"My father has sent me away. Until the end of the war, for my own safety. But I fear I shall only bring more conflict and danger to Westeros. You've seen what's out there. You've felt the biting cold. You know what must be done," Jon said through gritted teeth. "The Others must be defeated. No matter the cost. With fire."

And blood, Jon finished the thought uncomfortably.

"Daenerys Stormborn is your aunt..." Ser Alliser jaw clenched and unclenched. "You really are Rhaegar Targaryen's bastard?"

Jon gut churned with dread. And ice cold sensation seized hold of his body. His stalwart Stark heart screamed traitor, traitor, traitor.

"I am," Jon nodded, every fiber in his being repulsed by the confession.

"Jon is the unburnt," Thoros continued, oblivious to his Prince's discomfort. "The son of both ice and fire. He will find the Dragon Queen and bring dragons to Westeros. It has been foretold," Thoros opened his hands wide and the candles at the table flickered to life. The brothers jumped backwards.

"Magic!" Krieg shouted and grasped the hilt of his shortsword.

"Shit, Mother is never going to believe this," Ed mumbled in awe.

"Jon Snow will return with dragon fire, and the prophesied blade of light—"

"Enough," Jon snapped and turned to the other men. He had not intended to wield the truth of his birth against Ser Alliser and the black brothers, but it appeared Thoros' gamble would work in their favor. "The Others are the true threat to Westeros. House Stark is sworn to protect the North. My father, my brothers, and I will not abandon the Wall so easily."

The brothers shifted on their feet, still shocked and awed by the open display of magic. All but Ser Alliser, who gazed at Jon with an unreadable expression. Krieg still grasped his weapon with white knuckles, looking pale and frightened.

"But you are going to find dragons... right?" Edd interjected, hugging his cloak tighter and leaning away from the red priest. "Aren't they all dead?"
"Daenerys Targaryen has hatched three dragon eggs in the East," Thoros said.

"The dragon has three heads," Sam added in a sage tone. Jon wondered where he'd read those words. Maester Aemon told him something similar once.

The brothers could only stare at the three men opposite, dumbfounded and incredulous.

"We have come to Braavos to find another ship. A ship that will bring us closer to Lady Daenerys," Jon said. "You have my word. I will bring your news to both Daenerys of House Targaryen and Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. I will plea for assistance on your behalf."

Ser Alliser grasped Krieg's tightened fist and forced the man to relinquish his weapon. The black brother exhaled sharply, then turned and fled up the stairs of the brothel, presumably to the black brothers' quarters. Jon's eyes followed his retreating back.

"Our thanks… Jon Snow." Ser Alliser surveyed him with a serious frown. Finally, he bowed his head stiffly.

"It is my duty," Jon said. Wishing to leave the inn and these brother's far behind. This has all gone terribly wrong. "Farewell, brothers. I pray for your safe journey."

"And you," Ser Alliser replied solemnly. His gaze to the floor. The black brothers melted into the background, becoming shadows once more. Jon contemplated each defeated expression. The Lord Commander within wanted to bolster their spirits with words of encouragement, he wanted to beg them to take heart, but he did nothing. Remember, these men do not know you.

Once outside the inn, Jon breathed the incense-free air and rounded on Thoros, grasping him by the shirt and slamming him against the stone wall of the alleyway.

"You speak nothing of my heritage," he spat. "Nothing of my name, nor our journey's purpose. You breathe nothing and you think nothing until I give you leave, Ser Thoros. This is my final word. Betray me again, and you will find a new Prince to follow."

Thoros' calm at Jon's manhandling only infuriated the former Lord Commander further.

"Have you no shame?" Jon barked.

"None whatsoever," Thoros replied with a toothy grin. "There is no shame in the truth. I can only offer my apologies, my Prince," he said, with a note of contrition. "The old habits of a priest are hard to break. I could not stand such disrespect. But this one is an old fool, and must beg your forgiveness."

Jon's anger melted somewhat and he released the knight. "You are forgiven," he said simply, immediately regretting his angry actions. "Watch your tongue in the future. We are lucky it was only brothers, and not enemies."

Thoros nodded sagely and bowed his head. Sam looked down, red-faced at the display and knowing his own guilt, but said nothing.

Jon felt weary, suddenly exhausted by the confrontation with Thoros and the conversation with the Night's Watch. He turned his back on Thoros and began the long walk back to the inn. A second later, booted feet could be heard racing up the path.

"Halt!" Ser Alliser's booming voice sounded in the alley.
Jon spun on his heel, hand falling to his sword. The old knight of House Thorne strode towards their small group. In the light of the day, Ser Alliser looked younger than he had before. The lines on his face crinkled. The knight jogged forward and stood awkwardly in front of Jon.

"What is it?" Jon bit out, annoyed to be once again face-to-face with his former tormenter.

"I beg your pardon, Jon Snow," Ser Alliser said, shifted from foot to foot, from nervousness or some injury, Jon could not tell. "I must ask you to relay a second message."

"What?" Jon asked, short-tempered.

"My house served your father's in the war, Snow," Ser Alliser continued. "House Thorne was always loyal, to the bitter end. I was loyal. You remember that, Snow. You tell the Dragon Queen."

Jon shook his head and turned around.

"I was loyal!" Ser Alliser shouted at his turned back. "At the Trident! I was loyal!"

I was loyal! Echoed across the canal. But Jon did not care.

Jon stood at the edge of the free city of Braavos, facing the line of wind-breaking trees protected by law. The trees were meant to buffer the wind before it struck the city, but Jon could still feel chilly gusts ghosting across his skin.

Jon felt ridiculous. He knelt in the grass, as he'd seen the wargs do in the far North. Jon had asked one, once, why she sat on the ground. The warg had laughed and confessed it hurt less to faint from a shorter distance.

Mud soaked the knees of his pants. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It had been over a year since his last attempt to warg with Ghost. The most experience he had connecting with his direwolf's mind was in the mire of his dreams, but he recalled the feeling, and perhaps that was all warging required. A feeling. He had hated Orell too deeply to ask the other man's assistance. Varamyr Sixskins perhaps he could have spoken to—about the dreams and the greenseeing—but he had inherited Orell's eagle and he too, had learned to hate Jon.

"Nothing's happening," Thoros said.

"G-give him some time," Sam replied.

Jon squeezed his eyes and drew breath slowly. As if asleep, he thought, slowing his breath. The wind stung his cheek, it smelled of pine, and the cold was creeping into his bones.

He drifted for a while, attempting to focus on Ghost and the wilderness, but his thoughts were wild and uncontrollable. He thought of Daenerys, of Ser Alliser, and Thoros and the Others. He thought of Lord Stark's last words and their final goodbye.

"The beast may be happier in the wild," Thoros commented idly. Jon inhaled deeply, attempting to ignore Sam and Thoros' conversation.

The wind blew again, and he clung to the feeling once more. The wind. It howled. Ghost, he thought. Come back to me, Ghost.

Jon did not know how long he sat in the freezing mud. His feet had grown numb. Sam had long ago
wandered towards the tree line. He furrowed his brow, recalling the long nights on the tundra, far north of the Wall. The isolation. Jon was the lone wolf then, bonding with Ghost had never been easy but it was always possible. Why now, is it so difficult?

He reached with the tendrils of his mind. Ghost.

Several minutes past. His other companions grew restless.

"Come now, let's find a hot meal on the streets," Thoros said and stood, brushing off his red pants. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Jon sighed and frowned. "Yes, I suppose you're—"

"Look!" Same shouted, pointing to the North.

Jon spun around. True to Sam's word, a white blur raced towards him from a fair distance. Jon grinned as the wolf approached. The direwolf had grown. Burs, leaves and dirt decorated his once pristine coat but Jon did not care in the slightest.

"My old friend," Jon grinned and hugged the beast around the torso.

The smell of pine invaded his senses. White fur obscured his vision. Jon felt at peace, running his hands over the wolf's massive head.

"How I've missed you."

"Well, I'm off to see Gilly. Ha ha!" Sam smiled and fidgeted with his new black cloak.

The trio stood on one of Braavos' many docks. Ghost pranced through the adjacent alleyways, chasing rats and a few stray chickens. A red sun rose in the distance, highlighting the sky in a plethora of pinks and yellows. Jon handed Sam his heavy, book laden bag. Last night, Jon had decided to keep only Maester Marwyn's Complete Summary of Dragon Behaviors and Legends, the same book borrowed by Tyrion Lannister. If Tyrion Lannister considered the book worth his time, Jon would too.

"I'm sure she'll be eager to meet you," Jon smiled grimly and looked towards the sea. "She is probably daydreaming at this very moment. About a dashing wizard and a daring escape."

Sam blushed a bright red.

"You think she's alive, after all this time? Do you?" Sam asked.

"Anything is possible, Sam."

Sam looked toward the horizon and swallowed nervously. After another moment, he shifted his bag and pulled out a bundle of parchment.

"Here." Sam handed him the papers. Jon took them from his hands and stared at the elegant script. "I wrote these. Signed statements from the brothers. In case you have trouble convincing Lady Daenerys. I'm sure you won't! She's your aunt after all and you're... you."

Jon looked through the papers which detailed the events at Castle Black and the Shadow Tower. Even Edd had signed one, his scrawl was messy but his name still legible. Edd of House Tollett. Alliser of House Thorne. Brother Krieg even signed one, Krieg of Eastwatch by the Sea.

"... be keeping an eye on the Others and their wights. I-I could write you at Winterfell, I suppose
when your return home. And if you ever find yourself at the Wall, you'll have a friend in me, Jon,” Sam concluded.

"Thank you," Jon embraced Sam fiercely. "Travel safe, brother. You are no craven."

Sam stared at him, wide eyed and hopeful. "And you… brother."

Minutes later, Jon watched the black ship float away from the harbor, Thoros' at his side. Black figures could be spotted on the ship, moving side to side, lifting black sails. Jon longed to be among those figures. Beside him, Ghost stared forlornly after Sam.

"We will see him again," Thoros said solemnly.

Jon clenched the papers tightly in one hand.
Jon and Thoros arrive in Qarth.

Jon's beard grew once and it was cut. Twice, it was cut. Thrice, it was cut. And then Jon lost count and the days becomes weeks and months and possibly a year. Jon could not remember life outside of the steady oscillation of ocean waves. Salt consumed his senses, and salt became his life. Salted meat. Salt stains. Salt on his tongue.

He was learning Valyrian. Slowly, at first, but after weeks of practice he could participate in simple conversation and ask a few select questions. The lilting language felt unnatural on his tongue, and he butchered more than one vowel with his Northern accent. But steadily—and with Thoros' encouragement—he began to pick apart the subtle tendencies, and the lilting, poetic turns of phrases.

"Valyrian is the language of magic," Thoros would say.

Sailing past Valyria was both terrifying and humbling. The Captain thought it bad luck to sail too close to the cursed shore, so the company veered wide. Distantly, the crumbled, molten masses of lost cities could be seen, still smoking. The ruins like black skeletons, rising from the Earth. Ruins that scraped the sky. Jon could only stare, awed at the great heights and impossible twists of marble towers.

Thoros looked too long and burned his eyes. None of the others could bear the sight, but Jon could.

Jon gazed at the dragon lords ancient strongholds, embers in the dark, and wondered if Daenerys Targaryen also felt the burning desire to land on it's shores. For the first time, he longed to converse with one of his long-lost kin. If only to ask the questions he was too afraid to voice aloud. Did Rhaegar Targaryen dream? Did Daenerys Stormborn's heart ache with longing? Did King Aerys go mad with this feeling? Jon did not know. He could only stare, and feel Valyria call.

Maester Aemon drifted into his mind, and his dreams, more than once. Jon had thought of leaving a message with Sam, but could think of nothing plausible to say to the wizened old man that would not sound ludicrous. *Maester Aemon has suffered enough,* Jon told himself, to alleviate his guilt. *He need not know of yet another missed opportunity to bond with his blood.* And yet, Jon could not stifle the hope that the Maester might still live. For a little while longer.

The Qartheen ship anchored at Tyrosh, Volantis, and New Ghis. Thoros and Jon heard rumors of Daenerys, but rumors were mixed with legend and the only thing for certain was that the trail would be freshest at Qarth. On the last leg of its journey, the ship rested three days on the Isle of Cedars, to replenish the fresh water supply and hunt boar. Ghost lost himself in the small jungle. Jon proved to be the most successful hunter and that night, the crew feasted on roasted pork. It was sweeter and bolder than the sausage at the Wall, and Jon ate until his stomach was fit to burst. The Captain soon urged them onwards, fearful of the monkeys in the trees and the passing time, and Ghost returned reluctantly to the ship.
Time passed mercilessly slow. The days grew hotter and longer. Jon became a sailor and rower in all but name, and a singer at night, for lack of any other occupation. A speaker of Valyrian. A hunter. A storyteller. A wolf tamer. He dreamt of dragons and dead bodies and purple eyes.

And then, Qarth was before him.

The city of Qarth was exquisite and exotic. Exhilarating and exhausting. Jon stepped onto the dock, at once assaulted by foreign sights and smells, the sounds of various languages mixing and merging, sensations of an ancient world. However, unused to the steadiness of the Earth and spellbound by the surrounding sights, he walked straight into a woman carrying a woven basket of yellow fruit.

"Vaoreznuni," Jon said haltingly, attempting to help the woman with her dropped goods. She slapped his hand.

"Quogralbar ao!" the woman shrieked and bustled away, jumping at the sight of the white wolf, who snapped in her direction.

Jon blinked and turned to Thoros.

"If you're wondering why you don't know that phrase, it's because she told you to fuck off," Thoros said with a smirk.

Jon smiled grimly and pulled Ghost back to his side.

"Quickly, Jon Snow, we must avoid the immigrant officer," Thoros pointed to a heavily mustached, dark skinned man, rushing towards the Captain. Jon hesitated leaving the ship, it seemed strange to leave without a goodbye, but Thoros pushed him forward.

"Even here?" Jon narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"The less record of our whereabouts, the better," Thoros replied, looking surreptitiously left and right. "We don't know who might be following us. Even here, my Prince, even here."

Jon glanced backwards at the large wooden ship, the ship that had been his home for the last several months. The Qartheen vessel bobbed innocuously in the bay. A tired crew staggering on shore.

"No matter, we've already been paid," the red priest jingled a coin purse in front of Jon's eyes. Jon snatched it out of his hands and hid it beneath the red, salt-stained Targaryen sigil he carried around his waist.

The unlikely pair advanced into the city, Ghost hot on the heels of his master after Jon issued a sharp command. Armed with tall spears, men patrolled the streets nearby, adorned in bronze breastplates layered overtop black silk. Vendors had built wooden stalls against the walls of the docks' warehouses, and a large crowd thronged the circumference of the wharf.

Thoros took the lead and Jon had no other choice but to follow. The two ducked into a side alley between two houses, up a staircase, through an abandoned warehouse that smelled strongly of perfume, and raced through walls and walls of drying linens.

"Where are we going?" Jon called ahead, in Valyrian, for the sake of practice.

"To the red temple," Thoros replied in Westerosi. "I've friends who will house us discreetly. The food's not half bad either."
Jon's stomach sank, but the thought of a hot meal quieted any dissension.

The pair jogged onward. Once or twice Jon observed the priest reading scratched symbols on stone walls and archways with a furrowed brow. Jon recognized the flaming heart of the red god among those markings, and deduced the followers of R'hllor employed a code language of triangles and other geometric shapes. Jon lost count of the twists and turns, ducks and dodges of Thoros' convoluted chosen path.

*Perhaps that is the point,* Jon thought. Twice, the pair had hidden from marching officers, bearing the sigil of the Thirteen. *I once heard in King's Landing that Lord Varys has little birds around the world.*

The escape from the red keep drifted into his mind. *At least we are not running blindly through tunnels.*

Finally, the pair emerged into sunlight. Jon paused.

Qarth boasted a large open air market. Incense and spice drifted through the air. Jon gaped at the vibrancy of colors and abundance of golds and silvers, swiveling left and right to take in every unusual detail. A man walked on stilts, blowing columns of fire into the sky. Lions and tigers held by jeweled collars pranced through the streets, followed by their masters holding leather whips. A large and elaborate fountain decorated the center of the square, spraying water some thirty feet in the air. The woman wore a strange fashion, exposing one breast to the air and children ran naked through the streets.

And everyone, everyone was talking, talking and shouting and laughing. The sound of the crowd a constant dull roar layered overtop the sing-song of red, blue and gold plumed birds perched along the banners of the Thirteen overhead. An elephant ambled by, strongly smelling of Saffron and carrying six large gold and jade jugs on its saddle. A tall, pale Qartheen sat behind it's ears. Jon had never beheld such a large and lively city. Braavos and King's Landing were dull memories by comparison.

Jon's eyes focused on the hills. In the distance, high on the horizon, a column of black smoke rose. Jon frowned.

Thoros followed his gaze curiously.

"The House of the Undying lies in that direction," Thoros murmured in his ear. "Or at least, it should. What has happened here? Are we too late?"

For the first time in a long time, Jon felt cold. *What if the journey to Qarth was for naught? Was the Stormborn long gone? Or did she wage war in the streets nearby?*

"Regardless, let us gather information—and our wits—at the temple. I would rather not walk headfirst into a dragon fight," Thoros said sensibly. "And a bath would not go amiss."

Jon nodded in agreement.

Trekking through and beyond the market took a greater amount of time than Jon predicted. The pair passed beneath obsidian arches and over tiled murals of the Qartheen's greatest battles. The bustle of the crowd slowed their progress. Ghost was a bit of an oddity that attracted children's attention, and several mothers stopped to place their infants on the wolf's back, thinking the beast a source of entertainment. The debut of Ghost the White Beast earned him five bronze coins that day.

Finally, after what felt like hours, the two stood before a pair of red sandstone doors. The temple of R'hllor in Qarth boasted a smooth stone stairway leading up to it's entrance, but no other marking to
indicate the house of worship within. Without Thoros' insistence Jon would have thought it any other house on the street.

Thoros raised his hand to knock but before his knuckles hit stone, the door swung open. A young woman wearing the familiar red attire of the priesthood stood in the entry.

"Come, we have been expecting you."

Deep beneath the Earth, the priestess led Jon, Thoros, and Ghost, until the air grew cold and the only sound was the click of boots on smooth tile and Ghost's panting. The rubies sewn into the woman's midnight locks glowed faintly in the dark. The priestess was clothed in rich red silk and when she swept past Jon detected the scent of roses. Despite returning to the temple of his people, the priest of Myr looked decidedly out of place in his faded red cloak and ragged clothing. Jon glanced down at his scuffed boots and sweat stained shirt, his faded red cloak tied across his waist and shoulder, and decided he looked more pirate than prince.

Passage branched off of passage. Hollow skulls lined the halls, placed into carved depressions just above the level of the head. Their eyes bore into the darkness above them, illuminated briefly by the passing torch. Seeing and unseeing. Enemies? Jon wondered to himself. Or ancestors? Jon was not certain.

"No eyes on skull," the red priestess said, in broken Westerosi, "Or eyes on you."

A shiver traveled down his spine and Jon focused ahead.

Left, right, left, right, down, around, right, Jon listed to himself. Despite his best effort, the path grew tangled in his mind and after the third set of stairs, Jon could no longer recall the path to the surface. Occasionally, Ghost tapped his nose against Jon's right hand comfortingly.

After the eighth set of stairs leading downwards, the path enlarged into a cavern. Above them, a crevasse split the stone ceiling and light filtered down a tiny crack in the surface. Following the light's path, Jon's eyes landed on a large doorway.

The doors to hell, Jon secretly thought. Layers of wrought iron looked to have been melted over top of one another. Eight skulls arched above the entryway, flanked by the fading colors of a chipped tile mosaic. The entrance to the high priestess' lair appeared truly ancient.

The double doors opened of their own volition as the party approached.

Magic, Jon thought, or a bit of trickery meant to impress and intimidate.

At the door, the red priestess stepped aside and gestured within. Jon took the first step, looking backwards only after he had crossed the threshold to see if Thoros would follow.

The room was round. Like the inside of a large egg, Jon thought. In the center, a ring of fire encircled the largest, blackest circle of tile Jon had ever seen. A black so dark and thick, it seemed to swallow the light.

It does not reflect, there is only darkness within... Dragonglass! Jon realized. The bane of the Others, beneath my feet by the tons. Jon wondered where else dragonglass was hidden around the world. Stannis had sat on a mountain of it during his time at Dragonstone.

Runes inscribed the circumference of the platform in a language Jon did not recognize. A possible variant of Valyrian or Qartheen. Through the flames, Jon saw the silhouette of a large stone desk and
the shadow of a high backed chair, whose top resembled the curves of flames.

A tall priestess with hair the shape of a honeycomb stood, her back facing the newcomers. When she turned, Jon nearly gasped. Tattoos of fire tortuously traced her burnt and misshapen face. From what Jon could see, she might otherwise have been beautiful, with large doe shaped eyes and angular features. Garbed in the heavy red robes of her people, a large cut ruby rested in the hollow of her neck. The depth and darkness of her eyes resembled the black of the dragonglass beneath their feet. The lady of the red temple in Qarth was an arresting sight.

"Pardon me," she said in crisp Westerosi, and covered her mouth with an elegant square of black lace. "The Lord's work is not always beautiful."

"Valar morghulis," Thoros placed a hand on his heart and bowed.

"Valar dohaeris," the lady responded in kind.

Jon chose not to speak and diverted his eyes from the woman's face.

"I am Thoros, priest of Myr. I bring before the Red Lady of Qarth, Jon of the Houses Stark and Targaryen, Azor Ahai, the Prince that Was Promised, the Resurrected," Thoros said, matter of factly and bowed his head.

"So you say," the woman responded, her dark eyes turned on Jon. "In Qarth we are not so quick to name names. Come closer, man."

Beckoning with an elegant hand, the priestess asked him to approach.

Jon took a tentative step forward. And another. And another. Until the pair stood eye-to-eye. Up close, the lady was not so intimidating. Grey streaked her tall nest of hair and her eyes were truly a dark brown, not black as he had perceived. Wrinkles lined the edges of her mouth and eyes. The lady vaguely reminded him of Septa Mordane of Winterfell, and Jon frowned internally, the resemblance unsettling.

"We come seeking shelter. We have travelled far in search of Daenerys Targaryen—"

"The Mother of Dragons has long since left Qarth," the lady interrupted, folding her long fingers at her waist. "A pity. I was next in the line of supplicants. The rich outbid me at every turn, I had little chance to question the Khaleesi or see these dragons for myself."

The lady looked sternly down at Thoros, her displeasure obvious.


"Dragons," Thoros repeated. "We had heard rumors. How many?"

Jon glanced at his loyal follower. The red knight was smiling faintly and nodded in Jon's direction. The Braavosi rumors were not exaggerated.

"Three," to emphasize her point the lady held up three fingers, ticking them off as she spoke. "One, dark black and red, the largest and most fearsome of his siblings. The second, green and bronze, with yellowed wings. And the third, a cream, gold and orange scaled beast. I know not their names. The lady kept them staunchly at her side."
Hope mixed with trepidation stirred in Jon's chest. *Three dragons. The lady would not miss one, would she? One dragon to guard the Wall against the Others. I could steal one, Jon thought madly. According to Maester Marwyn, dragons are intelligent and understand language to a middling extent. I could persuade one to my side.*

"My lady," Jon spoke up. "Do you know where Lady Daenerys and her dragons have gone?"

"Perhaps," she frowned with thin lips, displeased. "Perhaps I know. Perhaps I do not. I say this not to tease you. I see many things in the flames. Some come to pass, while others remain mysteries of the abyss," she paused to sigh. "I have seen you in the flames. I saw you dying in the snow. Yet, here you are, standing before me."

Jon's heart skipped a beat. At the Wall, he ignored Melisandre's visions. The red woman's visions came as a constant utterance from the priestess, so much so Jon ignored their meaning. But the letter, the grey girl on a horse, and the daggers had come true. The storm might have come true too, had Jon lived to see it.

"You did not see an untruth," Jon replied. "I did die in the snow. The Gods chose to reawaken my mind several years in the past. I have sought to right the wrongs of the future, for my part."

The lady lifted her chin and scrutinized his appearance. A small smile lifted the corner of her lips.

"I saw something else in the flames, Jon of Two Houses," she said. "Show me, and sate an old woman's curiosity."

Jon did not understand her meaning, until moments later, when the ring of fire surged forth with new fervor. Jon took a step backwards instinctively.

"Show me," she said again and Jon understood.

With fumbling hands, he untied the Targaryen sigil from his waist and unbuckled his sword. Handing Sweetsinger to Thoros, he shucked his boots and his shirt. The knife that he had won at a game of cards was taken by the red lady, and so too, was his coin-purse and canteen. To Thoros, he turned and handed the copies of his mother's letters, the signed statements from the men of the Night's Watch, and Lord Varys' missive to Daenerys Targaryen. The entirety of his life and future, resting in a small bundle of paper.

Finally, he removed the last of his clothing and faced the wall of flames.

"Show me," she said again, and Jon stepped into the flames.


The House of the Undying

Chapter Summary

Jon enters the House of the Undying.

Chapter Notes

Warning, despair ahead.

"The House of the Undying," Thoros said forebodingly.

Jon stood and surveyed the ruins of the Warlock's lair, Thoros and Ghost at his side. Last night, after Jon had proven his blood by way of fire, the pair had dined with the acolytes and priests of Qarth's red temple. R'hllor's sanctuary beneath the city had been carved into the earth some thousands of years ago. Many of the stone caverns were furnished with jutting crystal geodes, repurposed to be shelves and altars. A large tapestry over the common hall depicted a red setting sun over the Jade Sea, and nothing more.

The followers of R'hllor had proven to be a wary but welcoming people. Jon was subdued by the curious and sometimes fearful glances cast his way, but Thoros soon had the room laughing at ribald jests in Valyrian, only half of which Jon understood. Ghost had been given a large bone to chew and scampered off into the dark tunnels to explore. Jon let him leave, feeling guilty for keeping the wolf contained for those many months at sea.

As for the Red Lady of Qarth, the priestess swore to assist Jon but warned Thoros that she would send word of Jon's power to Asshai as well as Thoros' failure to convert Robert Baratheon to the red religion.

"Your mission was clear," she told Thoros sternly, after Jon redressed. "You should have reported to Myr when you failed."

"My mission from Myr was doomed to fail. R'hllor gave me a new one. A better one," Thoros had replied with a small grin. "By all means, send word. It does not change my purpose."

Afterwards, Jon and Thoros agreed to rest, restock and gather their strength in Qarth. In the morning, the Red Lady led them to the ruins of the House of the Undying. According to rumor, the House had been destroyed by Daenerys' dragonfire after a confrontation with one of the warlocks. Scorched earth and rubble were all that remained of the once glorious tower of magic. Excavators, or perhaps common laborers, heaved fallen stone outward from the center of the ruins.

"A doorway has been discovered," the tall priestess raised a single finger to point ominously into the wreckage.

Jon followed the line of her finger, eyes falling upon a single, round doorway lodged in the ground.
A cellar. Despite the heat, a shiver traveled down his spine. Ghost huffed and pawed the ground at his side, nervous.

Jon placed a hand on Ghost’s head to calm the anxious direwolf, feeling the soft white fur between his fingertips. Ghost turned a wide-eyed stare to his master, and the uneasy feeling intensified, as if he could see into the mind of the wolf.

"There is evil in this place," Jon whispered to Thoros.

"I feel it too," Thoros gripped the hilt of his sword. "An oppressive magic, my Prince. Be wary and have faith."

The red priest stalked forward, kicking a few wayward stones out of his path. Jon watched his progression around the edges of the rubble. The walls were scorched, and even melted in some areas. Do the walls of Harrenhal resemble these ruins? Jon wondered. Ghost followed Ser Thoros cautiously, sniffing the ground and baring his teeth at unseen enemies.

Jon suddenly wished the albino direwolf had not been born mute. A fierce and terrifying howl would be a welcome sound at this time.

"What happened here?" Jon asked aloud, although he already knew the answer.

"The Mother of Dragons," the priestess reappeared at his side. "A blue-stained fool reached beyond his station, and kidnapped three baby dragons. Daenerys Targaryen took what was hers, and left behind this rubble."

"Pyat Pree," one of the laborers supplied helpfully, and then turned his gaze.

"Who now seeks revenge on the Mother of Dragons. He has set out with three of his brethren to seek her in Pentos. Although they will not find her there," She plucked from the ground a gnarled piece of stained glass. "The work of your kin."

Jon took the proffered glass, it was still warm to the touch. The colors had melted together, forming a distorted rainbow.

"How many days ago?" Jon asked.

"Days? Months," the priestess replied. "A fire coursed within the stone for a week afterwards. Explosions could be heard. Who knows what monsters and alchemical experiments the Warlocks of Qarth kept locked in the darkness? Who knows what the fire awakened? It burned through each hidden chamber, every secret level. And when the fire stopped, the people reignited it, fueled by contempt for the masters and their blue drink."

Months… I shall spend half my life chasing a burning ghost. Jon despaired internally, dropping the glass. It shattered unceremoniously on the ground.

"Pentos is half a world away," Jon said with a sigh. "I've gone the wrong direction."

"There is no wrong path, Jon the Resurrected," the priestess heard his sigh and replied. "God has led you to this place. Pyat trusted more in the shade-of-the-evening than the words of men."

"What do you mean?" Jon asked, blinking against the sun as he turned to look at her burnt face.

"Another city, says the fire."
"I have seen burning cities," Thoros remarked distantly. "But not Pentos."

*Has my world become prophecy and faded footprints?* Jon scoffed internally. How he longed for the simple days of Winterfell, when the bells in the morning and the evening told him when to wake and when to eat. Where the work was determined by the season, and he could enjoy a day of sparring without pondering the fate of the world.

*No, you have never had that life,* Jon corrected himself. Thinking of his childhood at Winterfell, his hidden jealousy towards Robb and the unending thirst to prove himself worthy of the Stark name. *You will never have that life.*

"The House of the Undying," Jon repeated Thoros' earlier words. "Do these creatures still live?"

"The Thirteen claim the Undying have finally perished," the priestess replied.

"Aptly named folks," Thoros snorted.

"Can any man survive dragonfire?" Jon asked, and immediately regretted speaking. Thoros gave him a knowing look.

"The door is warm," the priestess said and lifted her red robes to walk around the littered stones. "A fire burns within."

Jon followed, Ghost hot on his heels. Thoros quit his prodding of the rubble and followed his master towards the center of the ruins. The priestess stopped at the foot of the door. Up close, Jon saw a large iron handle protruded from its center. The metal was not cast in any particular shape. In fact, if asked, Jon would say that it was the most ordinary and unremarkable piece of metal he had every observed. The mold had various nicks, with spots of rust decorating its surface.

Jon knelt and grasped the handle. He swallowed a gasp at the heat originating from beneath the stone, and let go.

"None will venture below," the priestess said. "We sent men, brave men, into the darkness. Men tied with rope. The rope burns and we hear them scream."

Jon surveyed the entrance with newfound trepidation.

"Why not block the door?" Thoros asked what Jon was thinking. "Cover it with this rubble. Why go below at all?"

"Men go for different reasons. To hear their future told, to see the past. The door calls to them. A fever strikes them, and they cannot resist."

"And they die," Jon surmised.

"Yes," the priestess whispered sadly. "And they die."

The red lady of Qarth hung her head in mourning.

"You want me to stop it," Jon gritted his teeth and stood. "You want me to smother the fire."

The lady did not deny it, merely opened her hands in askance. Jon swallowed his uneasiness and glanced at her scarred face. Burnt flesh and bone. Jon wondered at her courage to come to this place, to ask him this favor, and he sought her eyes to determine her motivations.

But the priestess' dark eyes revealed nothing.
"He is not your errand boy!" Thoros suddenly roared in anger, bringing Jon back to the present. "This is your prince. The keeper of peace, the bringer of magic. This is Jon of House Targaryen and Stark."

"Can peasants not petition their prince?" the priestess quipped smartly. "I will tell you the cities I have seen, I will seek Daenerys in the fire. I will give you food and shelter and clothing. I will pay for your passage by ship. I will have the servant of the fire sing your praises from here to the end of the world."

"Information and service you should willingly offer to the rightful Warrior of Light," Thoros retorted. But Jon had already made up his mind and knelt before the door.

"Jon!" Thoros momentarily forgot his master's given title, when Jon grasped the boring handle and began to pull at the stone barrier.

"Help me!" Jon ordered in frustration. "We cannot afford to delay any longer! Daenerys has already left and the more we argue, the farther we drift apart."

After much effort, the door opened. Jon and Thoros dropped the heavy stone circle with a loud bang. Ghost sniffed the entrance and pawed at the darkness.

Is this the black abyss the priestess spoke of? Jon wondered. Where all the mysteries go?

"Whatever must be done, will be done," Jon stood and said firmly. "Whatever your wish, I shall see it fulfilled, and in return you will lead me to Daenerys Stormborn."

The priestess bowed in assent. Jon quickly abandoned his cloak in Thoros' arms, along with his satchel of important belongings. The Red Lady of Qarth had fitted both men with rich velvets of red, black and gold, and to Jon she gifted a black leather vest, vambraces and tall boots all etched with a border of flames, as well as a shirt of black chainmail. Jon hadn't known the purpose of the gift until now.

"Watch your back," Thoros said, his frown pronounced. "I regret I will not be there to watch it for you."

"Continue our mission, Ser Thoros, should I fail," Jon ordered, meeting the red priest's eye. Have I grown to trust him blindly? "Swear to me."

"I swear."

And with that, Jon stepped down, down, down into the darkness of the House of the Undying.

The light returned suddenly. Smoke rose from cracked stone beneath his feet. And snow lay overtop it. A distorted image. The world wavered back and forth.

Broken magic? Jon wondered and drew his sword. Sweetsinger rang pleasantly through the air, the sound causing the image to waver once more. He trekked cautiously forward as the memory unfolded. Jon knew this place, it was as familiar to him as Winterfell.

Stannis stood before him, proud and tall and grizzly. Stoic and bedecked in steel armor, he gazed down the steep side of the Wall's northern face and into the darkness. The Red Woman at his side glowed eerily, but her face shifted, distorted. At once beautiful, but when he blinked, ancient and wrinkled.
Snow drifted down lazily from the sky. Several snowflakes stuck to his eyelashes and Jon shivered in the sudden cold.

"You need only bend your knee."

Jon turned away from the Red Woman and her shifting face, towards Stannis. An unnatural light shone behind his cutting figure, giving the Stormlord a dark silhouette. Jon could not pinpoint the location of the light. *The sky itself is a freakish blue.*

"Lay your sword at my feet."

Jon's arms felt heavy. Lethargy tugged them downwards. A drugged feeling stole over his body. He was reminded of his first death, his death in the snow. The irresistible urge to sleep arose and Jon's vision blurred. If he could only lay down and rest for a moment, he would think better after a good night's sleep.

But then, the image flickered again. Jon blinked and pulled his shoulders back, raising Sweetsinger.

*What was that?* Jon thought frantically, his heart beating against his ribcage. *Remnants of the Warlock's magic?*

"Pledge yourself to my service, and you shall rise again as Jon Stark, the Lord of Winterfell."

"No," Jon said, watching King Stannis suspiciously. The counterfeit King was the clearest image in the room. Every detail as Jon remembered, down to the slight cut on his upper right cheek from riding through the forest beyond the Wall. "You are not King Stannis. You are not my King. And I am not the Lord of Winterfell."

The King's brow knit together in anger, and for a brief moment, his lips turned blue. His eyes red. Jon edged around the smoking couple, crossing dangerously close to the Wall's precipice.

The creature masquerading as Stannis lashed out. A burnt, deformed hand grasped his arm and Jon swung his sword. An unnatural shriek filled the air. Ice crumbled beneath his feet and the world was dark once more.

Jon landed in sand. Shifting sand. He stumbled to his feet and swung around, pulling at the neck of his tunic. It was hot, unbearably hot. He spun around, searching for the false King Stannis and the ever-changing form of Melisandre but he was alone. And he was thirsty.

Sand and dirt blew into his face and he closed his eyes. Upon opening them, the scenery had shifted once more. The upheaval nearly knocked him off his feet and Jon spun around looking for the unseen enemy, his sword raised, but the burnt creature had disappeared.

A small, abandoned tower rose in the distance and he ran as fast he could. Now he understood, he must kill the blue-lipped beast. *Surely, I wounded the animal,* Jon had felt his sword hit flesh. But the heat made his mind drowsy and it was difficult to think. *Water,* he thought. *Sleep. How long have I been here?*

*This place, these animals, they want me to sleep. They want me to die here.* Jon surged forward, his lungs heaving and legs unnaturally weary, his parched throat burning with every breath of dry air. *I will not die, I will not die here.*

Several bodies materialized at his feet and he stumbled, crashing into the sandstone gate at the base of the tower. The yellow sigil of House Dustin, streaked with blood, swam in his vision. Beyond, the
silver gauntlet of House Glover lay in the dirt. The men's dead bodies reeked of decay.

Sweat dripped down Jon's brow. Blinking, he turned away from the dead bodies after he was certain they would not rise again as blue eyes corpses. Immediately, his eyes were drawn to the steep ascent leading upwards. The stones were slick with blood. Fresh blood. A woman screamed.

"Lyanna!"

Jon raised his sword and swung, but the sword merely whistled through the air harmlessly. The spectre of Ned Stark paid him no heed as it raced past, followed by a spindly figure bearing the crest of House Reed.

"Father!" Jon shouted in alarm.

The world shifted and Jon raced after the younger version of Lord Stark. The stone steps beneath his feet slid left and right, throwing him off balance. A woman screamed once more, startling the scenery and Jon nearly plummeted off the tower's narrow causeway. Smoke was rising from the desert, and he coughed.

This world is chaos, Jon realized. It's burning.

Jon reached an open wooden door. Inside, a baby cried. Lyanna, the spectre had said. A wild and uncontrollable longing to see his mother took hold. Just once, Jon thought, just one moment together.

"Promise me… Ned."

Jon's heart leapt into his throat and he raced for the door, but it was already falling away, into the darkness.

"No!" Jon cried, leaping over fallen stone. "Damn you! Let me see her!"

Lay down your sword.

Jon raced for the doorway, desperate for a glimpse. Even a dying glimpse. A thick and acrid cloud of smoke appeared in front of him and he swung, but the image flickered once more. The door was gone, and so was the tower.

"No!" He cried, brokenhearted, tears in his eyes. "NO!"

No, no, no… echoed back.

A great weirwood tree towered above him. Red leaves stained the filtered sunlight, casting the snow in an otherworldly pink. White roots rose out of the earth in disorganized tendrils, grasping at frozen earth. Jon choked on the sudden chill. The cool air lent his burning skin sharp relief, but his heart still throbbed painfully in his chest. Distantly, his mother's screams echoed. Jon's eyes widened in horror.

So it is to be torture, Jon thought, looking over his shoulder. But the tower was nowhere to be seen. Visions of my heart's desires and yet, I cannot reach them. Smoke still filtered through the air. And I have not found the source of the flames.

The sky was grey and dark and snowing once more. The exhaustion Jon once felt had faded, replaced with an eerie calm, he dispassionately gazed at the large weirwood. Situated in a valley, Jon could see mountains distantly to his left and right and frosted grass grew until a line of darkened wood.
"Where am I?" he wondered aloud. The nature of the wilderness reminded him of the North, but the landscape was entirely unfamiliar.

A hand grasped his.

Jon looked down into the globular eyes of a child. Green and brown and unnaturally bright. Jon recoiled, wheeling backwards.

The creature did not follow, only stood, swaying in the wind, it's bones cracking under tension. A worm crawled out of her right eye socket and Jon was repulsed. Behind him, a feminine voice cried out, "Bran!".

Jon swiveled, but the earth fell away beneath him.

Winterfell, Jon thought in relief. The familiar sound of bells and men practicing in the yard soothed his ragged nerves. No, I left Winterfell.

A soft, black nose touched his hand and he looked down at Ghost. The massive direwolf was full grown, his red eyes looking upward at his master. Jon smiled at the beast, truly smiled. "You have been my true friend, Ghost." Jon told the image, or the wolf. Why am I here?

Jon sheathed his sword and looked across the battlements. It was winter for certain, a thick blanket of snow carpeted the ground. Sansa and Arya walked below, in the courtyard, whispering to one another. A pyre burned in the center square, but no one paid it any heed. Jon wondered who died but could not recall. Bolton banners hung from the Keep's tall walls, and one by one, wildlings took the banners down and the fire grew. Jon frowned, something itched at the back of his mind.

"Your Grace," a voice called and Jon turned.

"Ser Davos?" Jon said, the vision flickered.

"Ser Davos?" Jon inquired, but the Hand of the King was looking down at the fields surrounding Winterfell. The weathered face of the former smuggler wavered. Jon turned.

Scores and scores. Tens of thousands of blue eyes. Dead bodies marched on Winterfell. Dead horses, dead children, dead giants. A sickly silence permeated the air. The fields were filled, from the edge of the wolf's wood to Winterfell's walls. In their midst, the Others rode on skeletal beasts and the ice spiders of Old Nan's tales.

Jon's eyes swept over the scene in mute horror. The Night King stood with no mount, on an outcropping of rock. The Other's ethereal armor glinted in the dying light. With his right arm he lifted the sword of blue ice Jon had seen in his mind.

"Do not be afraid," a warm hand grasped his. Jon turned and Ygritte stood at his side. A silver crown graced the top of her head, wrought in the shape of intertwining dragons. "The dragon does not fear death."

This isn't right, Jon thought. Where is Daenarys?

Jon heard the beating of wings and knew no more.

Jon sat in a large, comfortable chair. A fire crackled at his feet. Awash with comfort and joy, he gazed down at the babe in his arms. The boy's eyes were closed contentedly, his arms and feet
swaddled in black fabric. The picture of perfection, Jon could not recall a moment when he had felt so much pride.

"Aegon," he said, though it was a voice not his own.

Jon snarled and shook his head. *No, this isn't right.*

"The Prince that was Promised…" the voice says again. And although Jon knew his mouth was moving. It is not him. He placed the boy in a red maple crib and picked up his harp. *Singing will ease this confusion…* the voice said internally. Jon agreed and plucked the strings. A black haired woman tended to the child and Jon felt at peace.

The babe cried briefly and he looked up, catching his reflection in the mirror. Silver hair and purple eyes gazed at him and the image wavered. Enraged, he flung the harp at the mirror. Gnarled, scabbed hands curls around the broken glass, reaching for him. Jon's hand closed around a broken shard and he stabbed at it. The room fell away and Jon was once more in a crumbling, dark ruin.

Jon attempted to unsheathe his sword but grasped empty air. *Damnit!* Jon thought fiercely. When had he laid it down? He used his feet to search the ground but his boot met only rubble. Jon heard shrieking in the distance.

"Where is it?!" Jon yelled in the voice not his own. "Where is the sword?!"

But no one answered.

Jon stumbled forward, blind in the dark save for a light in the distance. He placed two hands on the wall and felt his way through the darkness, stepping over small fires that had yet to be extinguished. Finally, he reached what appeared to be a library and the source of the strange light.

*The source of the fire,* Jon thought.

Large flames surrounded a sword, its blade lodged firmly in the ground. The books on the surrounding shelves were already burnt or in the process of burning. Jon stepped carefully around fallen tomes to reach the blade.

The pommel stuck upwards towards the heavens. A white wolf.

*Longclaw!* Jon thought, awash with relief. The Valyrian black steel rippled, reflecting the surrounding fires. Jon's hand was just upon it's hilt when—

The fire extinguished. A cold wind blew.

Jon spun, lifting the blade out of the ground. The Night King mere feet away, his hand outstretched. Jon thrust.

The blade cut smoothly through flesh and a gurgling sound reached his ears. Blood splattered across his face and chest. Jon stared, horrified as the world morphed and twisted once more. The library was gone, he stood in the middle of an empty room, the body of his one true companion skewered across the length of his blade.

"No," Jon rasped. "No!"

Ghost's body seized in pain. The wolf soundlessly dying as his red eyes stared into Jon's silver. The sword had pierced the animal's heart. The wolf, having been tricked into leaping at his master, still
hung midair, his lips snarled and hackles raised.

With shaking hands, Jon lowered the blade to the ground but it was too late.

"No." Jon pulled out the sword, carelessly tossing it aside.

"No!" Blood poured from the wound. Ghost's body turned limp.

"No, please. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Ghost. Please don't go. I'm sorry. I'll be better," Jon rambled, cradling the wolf's head. His hands shook violently. The fur was matted with blood. Jon was covered in blood. The floor was filling with blood.

"NO!" Jon cried. "Please... please. I'll do anything. Don't go, please don't go."

The wolf heaved its last breath in the dark to the sound of his master's begging.
Meereen

Chapter Summary

Jon arrives in Meereen and speaks with the Queen.

Chapter Notes

It has been suggested to me to explain my reasoning for Ghost's death. The story's theme is essentially: you don't get the family you want, you get the family that will have you. Ghost was symbolic of Jon's Stark heritage, which he must abandon. The reason I wanted to write this story was to explore conflicting feelings of abandonment and belonging. How I see it: Ghost was a safety blanket, a false sense of security that tied Jon to his past. As many of you have guessed, Ghost's death was also an homage to the death of Nissa Nissa.

Two months later...

Jon sat on a flat rock along the coastal road to Meereen. With a oiled cloth, he polished the Valyrian steel blade in his possession. Ripples in the metal appeared to shift and dance beneath his moving hand. The hand-and-a-half sword hardly needed sharpening but Jon found the methodical task soothing.

The blade was not Longclaw.

"Blackfyre," Thoros had explained, upon inspecting the blade. By removing the blade, the source of the fire in the House of the Undying was finally extinguished and the world purged of the last of the Undying's magic. "Brought to Essos by Aegor Rivers, or Bittersteel, the founder of the Golden Company. It has been thought long lost."

Jon could only stare blankly—in the aftermath of Ghost's death—as the wolf's head on "Longclaw's" pommel was replaced with a large, flat red ruby. For it's age, the blade was surprisingly well preserved. It's design shockingly simple. The sword's silver handles boasted single dragon heads with no other marking or design. No inscription nor sigil.

"The blade of Aegon the Conqueror?" Jon had asked.

"The very same."

Presently, Jon turned the dark steel over in his hands. How did Blackfyre come to be in the House of the Undying? A mystery for another day. Although Jon's heart called for Longclaw, no man could deny that Blackfyre was a superior weapon. Jon would place the blade's quality above Longclaw, but lesser than Ice.

Ironically, the blade's length stood at a hand-and-half, making it yet another bastard sword. Many of Aegon's descendents felt the blade represented the Targaryen right to rule and so to discover the
blade was bastard... Jon could only laugh mirthlessly at the gods' sense of humor.

Jon finished polishing the blade's edges. Jon and Thoros—for want of better things to do—would spar late into the night, every night, practicing not only with swords but spears and knives, when spears and knives could be borrowed from other caravans and tents. The road was far from lonely. Various sellswords had flocked to Daenerys' cities, hoping to earn gold in her conquests.

At first, Jon was unused to the lightweight Valyrian steel of Blackfyre, especially after wielding Sweetssinger's heavy iron body. Soon enough, however, Jon's memory of training with Longclaw returned. Now, he bested the red priest more often than not. As long as the knight did not use fire to his advantage. Although Jon could not be burnt, Thoros was a master in the art of diversion.

One night, in passing, Thoros confessed his magic growing stronger every day. The knight was keen on created displays of magic and fire for slaves and masters alike. Under the stars, the priest summoned burning infernos and scintillating flames. Thoros' exhibitions earned the pair coin and a healthy amount of fear, and thus, no complaint from Jon.

Despite the red priests' cheerful showmanship, Jon could not smile at dancing flames or glittering sparks. He could not laugh or drink or chat aimlessly like other men. His soul had turned taciturn and disconsolate. Joyless were his thoughts during the day, and harrowing were his dreams at night.

I blame myself, Jon thought. It was I who fell for the Warlock's last trick. I, who brought a direwolf halfway across the world. I, who shoved the blade in his heart.

Ghosts' body was burned. The wolves ashes were compacted into a small urn. Jon carried the urn in his pack and hoped to scatter the ashes in the Wolf's Wood, where Ghost belonged. He could not bring himself to lay the great beast to rest in the desert, so far from home. Not here, not in Essos, Jon thought morosely. In these forsaken lands.

Days turned to weeks. Weeks turned to months. The pair tracked Daenerys and her army of the Unsullied from Astapor, now in ruins, to Yunkai, and finally to Meereen where she ruled as Queen. The top of Meereen's royal pyramid could be seen from miles up the road. Distantly, Jon thought he spied red and black banners along the slopes.

"Today is the day," Thoros announced happily, standing from his breakfast of bread and dried fruit. The red priest turned to gaze at the looming pyramid.

Two nights previous, Jon had seen a silhouette of dark wings against the sky. A loud shriek filled the air, frightening a nearby flock of sheep into running. Jon's eyes followed the path of the black dragon—it's scaled wings and armored belly—as it flew towards Meereen. Jon recognized the image as it disappeared over the mountains. The vision from King's Landing. The vision he had shared with Thoros, so long ago.

It was the first time Jon laid eyes on a dragon, and yet he felt no joy. Scholars and rich men would die for such a sight, but Jon could not have cared less. It was only a sign. A promise that their destination was at hand.

"Today is the day," Jon sighed.

Jon stood on the steps of Meereen's great pyramid as one of Daenerys' many supplicants, practicing his speech. Forming and reforming the words on his lips. Dwelling and worrying over every possible scenario and revisiting every detail of the evidence. With raw nerves, he repeatedly touched the concealed package of letters hidden under his ribs.
How would the Queen react? With rage? Pity? Indifference? What if she killed him outright? What if she burned the letters, the last remnant of his mother on this earth, and sent him on a ship to Westeros?

Earlier that day, Jon and Thoros gained entrance to Meereen through the city's less popular Western Gate. The gate facing Slaver's Bay. It took both their combined wealth and some of Thoros' magic to convince the master of the gate to permit them passage. It was only after Thoros promised to enter the master's house and perform tricks for his children and former slaves, that the portcullis was lifted and the pair were welcomed into the city.

Jon ran a nervous hand over his cropped beard. The red priest paid the last of their silver to bathe in one of the Great Masters houses, newly repurposed as a public bath. Bathed, shaved and dressed in clean clothes, Jon felt a man again. Months on the road had left a sweaty grime on his skin and it was a relief to finally be free of the dust.

In line, he waited.

Several hours past and Jon began to grow agitated. By midday, the pair was halfway down the line. *How many merchants and poets, dancers and beggars will she receive?* Jon thought. *Before she tires?*

Thoros-the-shadow was always one step behind, only having left twice to find food and water for the pair. Three coppers remained. Sweat beaded on his brow underneath the high noon sun. Jon baked in the leather armor the red lady of Qarth had gifted him but he dare not shed his defenses. Blackfyre was fastened tightly to his hip—the ruby pommel covered by his Targaryen cloak—and Jon's hand often hovered over it's handle. Members of the Golden Company had recently been seen scouting Meereen. Their purpose? Jon did not know, but he would not risk losing Valyrian steel to a band of foolhardy sellswords.

*Meereen is not Qarth,* Jon decided upon reflection. *But another beast entirely.*

Slaves and masters walked the streets equally, warily examining one another with obvious disdain. An accidental brush of the shoulder was enough to let loose unbridled chaos in the streets, until the brawl was quieted by the Queen's eunuch army. The Unsullied patrolled the streets equipped with tall spiked hats and long spears. Jon thought it made the already too-tall soldiers appear incongruously oppressive. The march of armored feet could silence even the most vehement arguments, and the path would instantly clear as perpetrators fled the scenes.

*The presence of the Unsullied is a clear and obvious threat,* Jon thought. *But why? What sort of Queen threatens her people?*

Daenerys the breaker of chains, the freer of slave, the beneficent. *Mother,* she was called. *What sort of mother threatens her children?* The city's atmosphere was thick with tension, war, and anger; but also love for the Dragon Queen. Jon did not know what to think. Meereen was as dangerous as it was beautiful, and distinctly unwelcoming.

Jon hoped to leave the city as soon as possible.

The sun set. Jon slept in the streets. Thoros shook him awake every hour or two, when others vacated their position in line, leaving him restless. And when he did sleep, he dreamt of death and desolation. Visions of the Unsullied roaming the countryside, the shadow of their spiked hats marching through the wolf's wood. Shrieks filled the sky. First, the shriek of wights, rapidly replaced by the screech of dragons.
When Jon opened his eyes, the entrance to the pyramid room loomed closer. The smashed stone body of a golden harpy lay recumbent in a street nearby. The Unsullied guarded her fallen body and for one brief moment, Jon prayed that the Unsullied would never surround the slain body of Baelor.

"Today is the actual day," Thoros said with a mad gleam in his eye.

The former lord commander ground his teeth with anticipation. Despite waiting all these months, plotting and planning for nearly a year, Jon could not have prepared himself for the events that would occur within Meereen's great pyramid.

"Jon Snow of Winterfell, son of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, Warden of the North, speaking on behalf of the Night's Watch of Westeros," a bald man announced. "And Thoros of Myr, his sworn shield, servant of R'hllor, knighted at the Battle for Pyke."

Jon dared not look. Click, clack, click, clack, the heel of his boot sounded deafening as he strode single-mindedly towards the center of the hall. When marble steps came into view, he knelt. Seconds later, he heard Thoros do the same. Already, Valyrian and Ghiscari whispers originated from overhead and beyond the throne.

"It pleases me to know that my last call of the day shall be two men who hail from my country," the Queen spoke in a clear, feminine voice, choosing their common tongue of Westerosi. "You may rise."

Jon rose steadily to his feet. Slowly, ever so slowly, he lifted his gaze. The Queen was surrounded on all sides by various advisors. One man was unmistakable.

Ser Barristan Selmy leveled him with a curious look. During Jon's time in King's Landing the two never had the opportunity to speak, and yet Jon saw recognition in the knight's eyes. Ser Barristan wore the white cloak of his office proudly and Jon surmised the old knight had assumed his rightful place in Daenerys' Queensguard. To Barristan's left, a woman with dark curly hair stood stiff as a statue, her hands were folded at the level of her waist with practiced care. The lady's role in Daenerys' court was unknown to Jon. On the Queen's other side, a grim faced Unsullied stood with a suspicious lack of spiked hat. Hands crossed behind his back, the dark skinned man stared vacantly ahead.

And finally, the Queen.

Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen sat on a long cushioned bench. Garbed in gleaming silver silk, Daenerys bore the silver-gold hair and purple eyes of her ancestors. Jon recognized the dragon of wrought silver metal enclasped around her neck from his vision in the House of the Undying. Despite her status, the Queen wore no crown. A fact that Jon tucked away to ponder later.

Daenerys smiled magnanimously down at him, a kind smile that bespoke the truth of her welcome.

"You bear a resemblance to your father, Lord Eddard Stark," Ser Barristan Selmy spoke and Jon was grateful. The knight's words lended credence to his claim. "A truly just and noble man."

The Queen's smile died. Too late, Jon realized the mention of Ned Stark was an unwanted reminder of Robert's rebellion. The rebellion that toppled the Targaryen empire. Jon resisted the urge to rub a nervous his hand across his beard. A poor habit he had been having trouble breaking.

"Approach," the Queen waved him forward. "Do not be afraid. I am curious to speak with a man from my kingdom. What news of Westeros? I have heard King Robert was skewered by a boar, and Joffrey the pretender rules from my throne."
Jon took a three measured steps forward. The tips of his boots brushed the platform that would lead him to the Queen and Daenerys leaned forward to look at him. It was obvious she was eager to learn more of her homeland but Jon was unnerved by her piercing violet gaze.

*The worst is yet to come,* he thought ominously.

"Your knowledge is superior to mine, Your Grace," Jon began, as practiced. His solemn voice echoed in the grand emptiness of the hall. "I had only just left Westeros when the war began, and have heard little news of home."

Jon failed to mention Robb's near crowning. Jon failed to mention the mobilization of northern troops, the army gathered at the Golden tooth, Stannis' letters, the rape of the Saltpans and a great many other things that deserved to be mentioned. If Jon had learned anything during his short tenure as lord commander, it was not to trust until trust was earned. A lesson learned too late. Jon would not make the same mistake again.

"And what brings you to Meereen?" the Queen asked, a curious glint to her eye. "You say you come on behalf of the Night Watch. Is the current Lord Commander not Jeor Mormont?"

Jon wondered how she came across this knowledge. *Does the dragon queen have spies in Westeros? Is it possible she already know the truth of my lineage, and toys with me? Perhaps I am only meat for her dragons.*

"Jeor Mormont is dead," Jon said regretfully and, seeing no other reason to delay, launched into his story. "Which is why I have followed you from Qarth to Astapor, from Astapor to Yunkai, and from Yunkai to Meereen. The realm is in grave peril. The Night's Watch has lost Castle Black and wildlings have taken the Shadow Tower to the West. The wights and their masters, the Others, are marching on the Wall with an army of the dead. I was chosen to be the messenger to beg your assistance. Here," Jon pulled out the signed statements from the men of the Night's Watch, "are the eyewitness accounts of men from Castle Black and Eastwatch by the sea."

Jon pulled the prepared statements out of a leather sack he had purchased in Braavos. It had done its job protecting the parchment from Braavos to Meereen. Now, he could finally deliver on his promise.

The thin woman moved silently and gracefully down the throne steps, took the documents, and returned to Daenerys' side. The Queen did not so much as glance at the letters.

"The Others' weaknesses are fire and dragonglass," Jon continued despite the silence that met his declaration. "Their swords can slice through castle forged steel and our best armor. With each passing day, the Night King's strength grows as the bodies of the fallen are risen again, to join his army. Wildlings and wights alike march on the Wall. The Night's Watch begs the Queen for her assistance."

The Queen was silent. Unblinking. A statue on her marble throne.

"I met a man of the Night's Watch on my travels to White Harbor," Ser Barristan broke the silence. "A man named Dywen who carried the reanimated hand of a corpse in a glass bottle. I would not believe it, Your Grace, if I had not seen it with my own eyes. At the time I thought it a passing oddity. Magic from the far east, perhaps. A ploy to obtain more troops for the Wall."

Jon glanced at the bearded white knight, whose face revealed nothing. In the course of a conversation, the pair had formed an unlikely alliance. *In this matter, at least,* Jon contemplated the former Kingsguard. *Does Ser Barristan the Bold wish to return to Westeros?*
"Your story is rather… incredible," Daenerys began slowly, and Jon's heart sank. "And yet, the old scribes often attributed magical properties to the blood of the dragon. If I had not witnessed magic myself, I would not believe it."

Relief washed over Jon.

"However," the Queen continued and Jon's hope was stifled once more. "I cannot leave Meereen defenseless. The old masters of the Slaver Cities have begun to revolt. I cannot abandon my people."

Jon swallowed dryly and looked to Ser Barristan for assistance, but the knight only frowned. Gathering his courage, Jon steeled himself for the worst.

"Then I must ask for a loan—"

But Daenerys was already shaking her head. "Meereen is not rich in gold, but olives and cedar. What gold I have is tied to the crown and the Second Sons."

"Not a loan of gold," Jon replied and met her eye. "One dragon."

Beside the Queen, the lady gasped and covered her mouth. Ser Barristan's head swiveled to the Queen.

"My brother, Robb, can strike out from Winterfell with an army of northmen," Jon pressed onward. "Together, with dragonfire, we can retake the Wall."

Daenerys stared at him, her mouth agape. The hands folded delicately on her knee began to shake.

"You suggest I loan you a dragon?" she said incredulously, all Queenly kindness evaporated. "I am the Mother of dragons," she snapped angrily. "I would no sooner part from my own children. Let alone to a bastard from the North!"

Jon had expected the rejection. He had not expected the insult. A bastard from the North. Nausea ate at his insides, knowing what he must do. Knowing the truth and the promises he must fulfill. Knowing he could not return home empty handed. Had he not chosen this path? Thousands of lives rest in the balance. Swallow your pride and do what needs to be done.

_Fear is for winter_, the voice of Lord Stark echoed in his mind.

Internally, he sighed with resignation. _Lord Varys will be pleased._

"I was not born in the North," Jon said cautiously.

"I do not care where you were born, you ask beyond your station," Daenerys replied coldly. "I will see to the Wall when I return to Westeros, after Meereen has been secured. For now, the Night's Watch and your father, the Warden of the North, will suffice. You are dismissed."

The Unsullied that flanked the door moved to escort him outward. Jon took another several steps forward to evade their grasp. Meanwhile, the Queen stood and made to leave the chamber.

"I was born at the Tower of Joy!" Jon shouted after her. "To Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen!"

Daenerys held up a hand. The Unsullied halted their progression. Thoros stood between himself and the armored guards, hand on the pommel of his sword. Barristan Selmy too stood at the ready, and might have looked threatening if not for the look of shocked disbelief comically etched into his noble features.
Daenerys rounded on him and returned to her throne with decidedly less grace. Jon eyed her fearfully. If the Queen was devoid of kindness before, she was radiating hostility now.

"And what proof do you bring of this claim?" the Queen asked in an icy tone.

"That cloak," Ser Barristan Selmy leapt down several steps with a sprightliness Jon did not expect. The knight peered closer at the red fabric draped across Jon's waist. "I knew I recognized it. Rhaegar's cloak, a gift from his mother, Queen Rhaella."

"No," Jon retorted. "A gift from my mother, Lyanna Stark."

Without further ado, Jon unclasped the cloak. The Targaryen sigil was revealed. He laid it down at the foot of her throne, and drew his sword. The Unsullied started but Jon quickly laid Blackfyre atop the red fabric and stepped away. Ser Barristan watched curiously, seemingly entranced by Jon's facial features, mumbling words under his breath.

"Blackfyre, the Valyrian steel sword of Aegon the Conquerer," Jon said, reaching into his bag for the evidence the Queen demanded. "And here, a series of correspondences between Prince Rhaegar and my mother, Lyanna Stark, as well as Eddard Stark, dated the year of Robert's Rebellion. Lord Varys corroborates this story as well, with his letter, here."

The woman at Daenerys' side sprung to life once more. The young lady gathered the letters and sword awkwardly in her arms and returned speedily to her mistress. Ser Barristan plucked the cloak from her grasp as she walked past and ran his hands over it reverently.

On her cushioned throne, the Queen paused to examine the sword more closely, but again, did not read the proffered documents. Instead, she rose and descended. Stopping only once she stood at arm's length.

Jon's heart raced. She was beautiful, up close, almost ethereal. The Queen had clear, pale skin and slender features. The silver gold hair on her head was braided intricately to denote her royal status. Jon met her eye for eye, refusing to look away.

She's young, my age, Jon realized. Up close, Daenerys was much less intimidating. Jon stood a good head taller. We were born in the same year, during the same war. Yet we've lived two very separate lives.

Outside the pyramid, the evening bells tolled. The day was at an end. One the adjacent balcony, a servant lit the braziers and the sun began its descent. Still, Daenerys did not cease her inspection.

"Seize him."

At once, Thoros drew his sword and set it ablaze. The flames crackled, casting an unnatural red glow on the walls. The lady at Daenerys side screamed. Ser Barristan drew in turn and the pair faced one another.

"Thoros!" Jon laid a hand on his shoulder, before the violence could begin. "No. We will defer."

The red knight's sword clattered to the ground. With cheekiness, Jon thought, mildly amused. Ser Thoros raised two hands above his head, and both men were grabbed from behind by the Queen's Unsullied.

"Take them to the cells."
Test by Fire

Chapter Summary

Daenerys confronts Jon.

Jon sat at the Lord Commander's desk. The desk he had made for himself when Stannis and all his knights and lords stole the rooms Castle Black had to offer. The familiar crinkle of black leather reached his ears and Jon leaned forward to take the proffered letter, sealed with pink wax.

Bastard, it began, and Jon frowned.

But I am not a bastard anymore, he wanted to say but his mouth was frozen shut. He was trapped in a memory from the past.

"Snow?" Jon looked up at the familiar face of Tormund Giantsbane. The man's red beard stood in stark contrast to the greys and whites of his furs and his peculiar curved sword hung from his hip.

Tormund spoke once more. Jon could see the words on the chieftain's lips, but sound was garbled. Jon felt himself stand and hand the letter to the wildling. His mind screamed at him. Stop, stop, do anything but that! And the crow on its perch cawed, Snow! Snow! Snow! Jon tried to turn and glare at the old raven, but his body would not obey.

Lord Commander Jon Snow raced to the Shieldhall. Internally, Jon's mind protested. A fool's errand, you cannot convince these men to abandon their post. Again, the body would not listen.

Jon passed the knights of Queen Selyse's guard, more wildlings, Edd, Wun Wun towering over the gate, Ghost the wolf who came padding after him, and finally he stormed into the hall and mounted the platform as he had so many times before.

The sound of Tormund's horn echoed in the rafters. Jon read the blasted letter again. Its words ricocheted and rebounded mockingly in the confines of his mind.

"I want my bride back. I want the false king's queen. I want his daughter and his red witch. I want his wildling princess. I want his little prince, the wildling babe. And I want my Reek..." Jon recited faithfully, knowing the anger it would incite amongst the Queen's men, the Night's Watch, the free folk and any other rational men.

No, Jon groaned internally. We cannot go. We must not.

The crowd roared with fury. And yet, the scene unfurled differently than before in another life. Jon could see the free folk cheering and stamping their feet, but the many men of the Night's Watch were silent. Out of the corner of his eye Jon saw a crowd of black brothers slink to the side and disappear.

No. Not again. Jon urged his past self to pay heed to the missing men, but he could not change these events. Jon's booted feet led him outside, to the sounds of screams.

Wun Wun dangled the body of a knight in his large hand. The Giant roared. Ser Patrick's cloak and shield were strewn across the bloodied snow.
Still, despite the familiarity of the scene, new details emerged in Jon's consciousness. The missing men had surrounded him, their swords already drawn. How could he not notice the wall of iron pointing towards the sky? More than one blade was bloodied and Jon realized his own men had struck the Giant to cause this foolishness.

I should have known.

Wick slashed at his throat. Jon grasped the man's wrist and bent it backwards, wheeling away to avoid a second strike. Strangely, the steward looked apologetic as he held up his hands in surrender. Jon stared into his sorry eyes with confusion. Inside, he roared with fury. I was your lord. Your brother!

Another dagger buried in his belly and Jon fell to his knees. No, Jon thought, panicked, I don't want to die again. I don't want to die at all.

Strangely, the last face he saw was Lady Stark's. She hovered over his dying body. Tully blue eyes looked down at him, disappointed and angry.

"I told you to leave. We don't want you here, bastard," her green eyes were full of hatred. "It should have been you."

Jon paced the confines of his cell. Another nightmare. Another dream, this one more real than the last. The hot, damp air stuck to his skin.

In the past several months Jon lost count of the number of times his mind revisited that night. The night of his first death. A plague upon my sleep. The dream recurs whenever I am close to death, and I am close to death in Meereen. A violet-eyed death.

He would not sleep. He could not sleep. For fear of dying in the night and fear of death. Sometimes, he was stabbed. Other nights, he suffocated in the smoke. Regardless, he had come to fear the night.

And it was nighttime, of that he was certain. The small window above his cot allowed him to track the days. A full night and a day had passed since he had first spoken with the Queen.

"Could have been worse," Thoros told him, when the Unsullied first left, and the pair were free to converse through the bars on their respective iron doors. "We're still alive."

"Could be worse," Thoros reminded him the next day. "We're being fed."

"Could be worse," Thoros said, once the sun had fallen. "Torture is a hell of a punishment."

Jon continued to pace anyway. He had been certain the Queen would visit him during the day but when sunset neared he feared the worst, and thus began his frantic inspection of the cell. He ran his hands over every crevasse and all four corners, every ridge he could press and pull. The bars and walls were immovable. The floor made of smooth stone. Jon had no weapon and his armor had been stripped from him. Moreover, the pair had no allies within the pyramid and thus, no hope for escape.

I've failed, Jon thought sadly. I must return empty handed to not just Lord Varys, but Sam and Edd. Robb and my father. And Maester Aemon! For surely Sam has spoken to him about dragons and the East. Jon did not think he could bear the looks of disappointment. Even if I could escape, where would I go? I've no ship. No army. No way to hide from dragons.

Jon's despairing thoughts were interrupted by the sound of rusted hinges swinging open.

Abandoning his anxious meandering, Jon glanced worriedly out the bars of his door. Long shadows
cast across the hallway leading to his cell. Seconds later, Jon heard footsteps and the creak of leather. Several figures approached.

The door slammed open. The Queen and three of her eunuch guards stormed into the small dungeon, along with the tall figure of Ser Barristan Selmy. The spear points of two Unsullied drove him backwards to make room for the royal lady. Daenerys' silver dress shone in the moonlight. A beacon of light in the darkness. Any other circumstance, and Jon might have been comforted to see such beauty.

An Unsullied kicked him behind the legs and Jon came crashing to his knees. A hand encircled the nape of his neck and forced his gaze downwards. Jon's eyes fell to the hard stone floor.

"I should kill you," Daenerys said quietly.

Jon did not reply. He did not think it wise.

He did, however, rotate his head slightly to glance at his captor. The Queen faced the small window of his cell, her eyes on the moon and shimmering stars. Weighing the merits of my life in her hands, Jon thought. My life, as insignificant as a single star amidst the galaxies.

"Suppose you are telling the truth," the Queen said with an indifferent tone, as if speaking of the weather or another trivial topic undeserving of her time. "Which I doubt you are. A son born of Rhaegar would have a stronger claim to the Iron Throne than myself, a sister, and a woman. Why should I recognize that man's birth?"

Jon's thoughts whirled, twisting and turning, weighing the merits of the truth. Would the Queen believe him? No, Jon already knew the answer, but I have to try anyway.

"There will be no Iron Throne. No lands for the living. No sun, nor dragons, nor castles if the Others cross the Wall," Jon replied, his mouth dry and his voice raw. "I care nothing for your throne. Keep it. Burn it. Do what you will. Lord Varys foolishly believed my blood would soften your resolve to remain in Essos. I should have seen past his treachery."

Ser Barristan shifted on his feet at the mention of Lord Varys, but said nothing.

"You speak of Lord Varys' treachery," the Queen folded her hands and looked down on him with disdain. Jon was reminded of the Catelyn Tully in his dreams. It should have been you. "What of your own? You spread lies about your heritage. Lies about my brother."

Not lies, Jon wanted to protest. But how long did it take him to truly believe? Not until I heard it from Lord Stark. And I had seen the evidence. I had read it. Memorized it. Held it in hand for months. Still, I did not believe.

"Believe what you will," Jon said. "It matters not. I came to ask—Nay, beg for your assistance..."

The Queen raised a single skeptic brow.

"...the North bleeds," Jon continued. "Fire is their only weakness, fire and dragonglass—"

"Enough about the Others—" the Queen interjected with a wave of her hand.

"No!" Jon erupted and stood. Ser Barristan drew his sword and settled the point at Jon's neck, but he persisted, leaning into the iron. A blade has been held to this neck before, and I survived. The Queen's icy countenance faltered as surprise graced her features and fear flickered in her eyes. "Don't you understand? This isn't a trick. This isn't a game," Jon pleaded impassionately, the skin on his
neck stung bitterly. "Your people will die. We are all going to die."

The Queen closed her eyes. For a moment, Jon thought he might have swayed her resolve.

"No," the Queen pursed her lips and opened her eyes. Violet orbs clashed with silver steel. "You are going to die."

Jon's heart sank into his stomach. A cold terror gripped his insides. Suddenly, the Unsullied took his arms forcibly and he was marched out of the cell. Jon stumbled over nothing as his feet disconnected, refusing to cooperate with his buzzing brain. His heart lodged in his throat and he could not protest. Daenerys followed with her Queensguard closely.

Thoros' scarred hands appeared on the bars to his cell and Jon found his voice and called back to him.

"Thoros! Remember your oath—" Jon's words were cut off by a swift punch to his abdomen and he saw stars.

The Unsullied lifted him up by the armpits and set his on his numb feet. Jon heard Thoros call to him but his ears rung with a high pitched sound.

The Queen, her knight, Jon, and the men dragging him journeyed deeper and deeper into the darkness of Meereen's great pyramid. The Queen took the lead, holding a single torch ahead of the column to light the way. Daenerys offered no explanation as to their destination and Jon raked his mind for a solution. Escape would be impossible. Chances were slim when he was surrounded by the enemy. *For truly, we are enemies now.*

*The Mad King's daughter,* Jon thought derisively. *I should have known.* One of the last of her kin, and she would have him slaughtered. For her birthright. For the Iron Throne.

Jon had the strongest urge to laugh, but he supposed that would impress upon the Queen that he had lost his mind. *I might die in Essos.* Would he be given a third chance to right the world? A fourth? Was he in hell? Or was this life his final life?

The group paused at the top of a long and narrow stairway leading into shadow. A black abyss. Jon was prodded by the butt of a spear and so took the first step forward. Down into the depths of the pyramid.

The stairs stretched onward. The torch behind his back illuminated only a step or two ahead, so Jon trod carefully until one of the Unsullied pressed on his back, urging him to move faster. After a hundred steps, the stone turned rough and uneven. The descent continued until the party emerged into the moonlight and stopped in front of a large stone circle.

Jon held his breath as a large bronze lock was turned. It took three men to move the massive barrier. A wave of hot, rancid air rushed out and Jon gagged. The stone door finally shifted way and Jon could see another dreaded set of stairs leading downward. A spear pressed against his back and Jon was once again forced to be the first. The Unsullied followed. Daenerys trailed after and Ser Barristan held the rear.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, the torches were doused. Jon blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Light streamed from the open stone door, casting tall shadows into the void.

"Your Gr—" Jon began but was struck once in the chest and then again, in the stomach. Jon grunted in pain and staggered away, the Unsullied prodding him forward until he stood some ten feet ahead, in the darkness.
Jon turned to look at the Queen, whose eyes were focused on the darkness.

"Go on," she said.

Jon followed the direction of her gaze, but saw nothing. *Nothing but black.*, Jon squinted. The Queen's words echoed in his mind. If he was going to die, why bring him here?

Jon did not understand, until he heard the rustling of chains in the darkness.

*Clink. Clink.* Then silence.

Turning, his eyes swept over the inky blackness. *Something is here. Someone.* And Jon knew. Jon knew as a hulking shadow grew closer and closer, larger and larger, the sharp edges of its razor-edged back solidified in the gloom. Jon knew, right then and there, where the Queen was hiding her dragons. Jon knew why he had been brought here to die.

*Clink. Clink. Clank.*

A head triple the size of a horse's materialized in front of his eyes. The dragon's bronze and green scales rippled with every rasping inhale and exhale. A pair of golden orbs fixated on his own. On its neck, Jon saw a large iron collar attached to a large chain tethered somewhere in the dark.

*Clink. Clink. Clank.*

Another set of chains. Another scaled head appeared, this one to Jon's left. Its scales gold, white and orange. Another golden-eyed intelligent gaze assessed the intruder.

Jon's blood thrummed with fear.

The green and bronze head bent closer. Jon's racing heart stuttered to a halt. The dragon's massive maw parted slightly so a large tongue could taste his shirt.

Long, black teeth, some the size of his forearm, jutted from its mandible. *If the fire does not kill me, those teeth surely will.* A second later he was awash with unbearably hot breath. The sound of wind reached his ears and he wondered if a breeze had made its way down the steps, but it was the dragon's nostrils, inhaling Jon's scent.

*Do not move,* Jon schooled his nerves. He commanded his body to be still but he could still feel the green creature's eyes on every inch of his skin.

After a long, tense moment—wherein Jon's primary pursuer was content to sniff—the cream colored beast grew disinterested with his brother's prey, and turned his massive body to curl on the ground. Jon might have been relieved except for the colossal beast currently invading his senses.

*Whoosh, whoosh,* the creature sniffed and huffed, pressing its great nostrils against Jon's belly.

Jon stood face to face with those golden eyes, frozen in terror. Once more, Jon was struck by the immense size of the dragon before him. Standing straight on both back legs, the dragon might have reached Wun Wun's height. The horns alone, flanking its skull, were the length of a man's arm.

Its eyes were transfixed. A molten gold. *There is something there,* Jon thought suddenly. *A hidden intellect.*

Another long moment passed—the dragon and the former Lord Commander staring at one another, its great, bat-like wings surrounded him on both sides—before Jon finally remembered his readings.
He gathered his courage and armored his heart, took a small step away from the beast's deadly jaws…

And bowed.

"Well met," Jon said in halting Valyrian. "Great dragon of Meereen"

*Sam would be proud*, Jon thought detachedly. *I shall die an educated man.*

The beast blinked slowly and then cocked its head to the side. The reaction so similar to his deceased direwolf, Jon momentarily froze. "Ghost?" he asked impulsively.

The dragon gave no reply, only inhaled his scent once more and pressed his nostril against Jon's belly, on the scars of his old wounds. Its breath created waves of heat in the air. Jon's eyes traced the arch of the creature's massive horns with curiosity.

*I am not dead yet*, he mused to himself.

Jon tentatively laid a palm against its scaly forehead, in a manner similar to how he used to greet his old direwolf. The animal's skin was not wet or slimy, as he expected, but smooth and dry, like hardened leather. Each scale exhibited a spectrum of color. Although green and bronze overall, Jon could detect small flecks of reds, browns and yellows in the reflected moonlight. The beast's neck rippled and a rumbling sound reached his ears. Jon wondered if the animal was trying to talk back.

*Fire cannot harm a dragon*, Maester Aemon's calm voice gave Jon courage, and the knot between his shoulders relaxed. *I might survive.*

"Rhaegal!" the Queen's voice broke the moment.

Jon tensed.

The creature froze, its bronze eyes flitted to its mother.

"Dracarys."

The dragon's head reared back and Jon was engulfed in flames.

Being the third time Jon's body had caught fire, the experience was not quite as alarming as it had been previously. Jon felt warm, as he had come to expect. The flames featherlight kisses tickled his skin. The beard he'd grown burnt away, leaving his face and head bald and sending sparks into his eyes. Jon felt the fire lick across his scalp and down his back, itching its way across his body. The clothes he wore caught fire and began to disintegrate. It was a fascinating experience and all he could think was, *I must remember to tell Maester Aemon.*

The dragon paused, closed its mouth and searched Jon with its oddly bright eyes. Upon seeing its foe still stood, the creature blinked and breathed fire once more.

Jon lifted his palm in the flames, turning it over and over, waiting for the agony that was meant to come but knowing it never would.

"Keligon!" the Queen called.

*Rhaegal*—as Daenerys called it—halted his attack. Jon stood, clothes burning, and turned half-face to look at the Queen.

Daenerys eyes showed a hidden torture. Tears streaked down her face, and her hands shook as she
pointed at Jon. The features of her face contorted in anger. "Viserion! Dracarys!" The cream colored dragon lazily ambled forward—clink, clink, clink—and cast fire to the same effect. Jon met the luminescent eyes of the dragon called Viserion.

"Dracarys!" she shouted tremulously, the confusion evident in her voice.

Jon stood still for Viserion's orange streaked fire. The creature soon grew bored of this game, and turned its scaled back on Jon, roaring its displeasure to his mother as he did so. The chains attached to its neck rattled ominously as Viserion's massive form molded into the shadows. A great chomping sound echoed in the pit, and Jon assumed meat had been left somewhere for the dragons to consume.

The green dragon lingered behind, still as stone, staring unblinkingly at Jon's smaller figure. Its large neck extended in curiosity.

Jon bowed once more and cautiously stepped backwards. Once, twice, thrice.

Rhaegal, as he was called, lunged forward. Jon heard the dragon's chains scrape the ground as it cried out. Quickly, he leapt out of the reach of the beast's jaws and claws, but Rhaegal had not moved to bite. The animal cried sorrowfully, and sent one final inferno at Jon's feet.

The flames licked his feet as he turned away to face his audience.

Rhaegal cried again at his turned back. A pathetic screech. Almost pitiful.

Ser Barristan moved first. The white knight extended a single hand to offer Jon the old red cloak he'd stolen two days before. It had been cleaned and the torn fabric at its base stitched back together. Jon draped it around his waist gratefully, absentmindedly stamping out the fire still burning on his scalp. The older knight's blue eyes searched his face for an answer but Jon was not paying attention.

The Queen's footsteps echoed as she fled up the stairs. Jon watched her go, knowing it would be foolish to follow, and knowing no words could ease her pain. The green dragon continued to shriek and cry for attention. Jon felt a twinge of guilt for the chained animal. *Alone, in the dark.*

Jon looked to the knight.

"Will I die today?" he asked Ser Barristan.

The two surveyed one another. Jon half-naked and unarmed. The knight in full Queensguard regalia.

"No," the older man replied softly. "Not by my hand."

Ser Barristan grasped his bare shoulder and led him away. Neither looked back. For the next hundred steps, Jon heard the distressed roar of the green dragon, Rhaegal, as it cried to be released. Every screech piercing his heart. *Alone, alone, alone in the dark.*
The Audience

Chapter Summary

Jon speaks with Ser Barristan and Daenerys.

A/N I have edited some controversial dialogue in this chapter. A great many readers read the dialogue literally when it was intended as hyperbole.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jon woke on a cloud. No, not a cloud. A featherbed. He slowly sat up and set his bare feet on the floor, his limbs heavy and sluggish. Blinking, he realized no nightmare had disturbed his sleep and the familiar ache in his joints had dissolved sometime in the night.

No, the true nightmare is in my waking hours, Jon recalled the heat of Rhaegal's breath and the Queen's tormented voice. Dracarys.

He rose with the red dawn, washed his face, and donned the fine clothing that had mysteriously been laid out on the adjacent dresser. Finding a razor and soap, Jon proceeded to shave the burnt edges of his hair and beard, preparing for the inevitable audience with the Queen.

The audience did not come soon enough.

The midday bells of Meereen tolled as he paced the tiled floor of his quarters. At the sound of the bells, a plate of bread, oil and olives was brought in by a thin, round faced young boy who scuttled away in fear. Jon left it untouched. He had no appetite. He could only pace and think. The cogs of his mind spinning furiously out of control.

It seems Daenerys will not kill me, Jon thought. For now.

Last night, Ser Barristan escorted him to the room he currently inhabited. A room near the top of the pyramid. Jon's half-naked appearance had attracted bizarre and startled looks from the passing noblemen and shavepates. The Unsullied did not so much as blink, passionless as they were. Once the knight halted in front of a open, gold painted doorway, Jon had slammed the door shut and fallen onto the bed, exhausted.

Noon faded to evening. Still, Jon paced and sat and tossed and turned on the bed and paced once more. More than once, Jon's thoughts returned to the green dragon, Rhaegal. The creature's cries, if not so frightening, might have softened a more compassionate heart. An unfortunate name, Jon attempted to stroke his beard but finding no hair, retracted his hand as if burned. I can offer the dragon a new name. A new life. A new purpose besides serving its mother from a cage. Why does she keep them captive?

There must be a reason. A lifetime ago, Lord Eddard brought home six direwolf pups for his children. Raising Ghost had been a challenge. Jon had indulged the wolf as often as he could, determined not to deny the animal his true nature. With food and hunt, with seldom a leash and seldom a cage, Jon formed an unbreakable bond with his direwolf. According to Sam, the dragons of
Westeros perished over several generations. Daenerys' ancestors caged them in a poor attempt at domestication and over time, the dragons perished.

Tyrion Lannister would know more on the subject. Jon wondered if he could use this information to persuade Daenerys to release the dragons. Would they follow me, if I asked? Jon thought back to the lessons learned North of the Wall. If it is possible to warg into a wolf, or a bear, or an eagle, would it be possible to merge with the mind of a dragon? Jon thought it might be possible, but terribly dangerous.

Thump, thump, thump.

A knock interrupted his thoughts. Jon heaved a sigh of relief, Finally, and opened the door. The hinges swung open and Ser Barristan's aged face was revealed. Garbed in the crinkled white of his office, the former lord commander looked as if he had not slept nor changed clothing. A haggard expression was set to his features.

"Ser Barristan," Jon greeted the knight with a nod.

Ser Barristan appeared to struggle with a multitude of proposed greetings on his tongue, before settling for an anticlimactic and informal, "Jon."

The two faced one another awkwardly.

"Several noble messengers from Yunkai," the white knight said regretfully,

Jon waited for the other man to speak his intentions but the knight was seemingly bewildered by the situation. Barristan Selmy's blue gaze flitted over his face. Up and down. Side to side. Over his brow. Across his chin and for a moment, the knight was fascinated with Jon's nose, for whatever reason.

"And," the knight cleared his throat. "She is unable to offer you an audience today."

Jon bit back a frustrated sigh.

"Very well," Jon replied, and, unable to resist the barb, continued. "Shall I die today, or tomorrow? Will you swing the sword, Ser?"

Ser Barristan startled, his gaze ripped from Jon's nose to look into the younger man's eyes.

"Neither day," Ser Barristan said earnestly. "You shall live, Jon Snow. Her Grace debates the merits of recognizing your claim, but she is not keen to stifle the life of her only living relative."

Jon grit his teeth. Her only living relative.

"If she wishes to save her kin," Jon replied. "Bid her think of Maester Aemon at the Wall. Her true kin, whose life is in mortal peril."

Ser Barristan continued to stare unnervingly at his face.

"You are not the Queen's true kin?"

Jon frowned.

"The Northerners are my people," he said with finality, moving to close the door but the knight extended an armored arm forward, rendering the door immovable.
Jon stifled his rising anger at the knight's boldness.

"You claim your mother's heritage, quite readily," Barristan said with a furrowed brow. The knight did not sound angry, but curious. "Not your father's and all that comes with it?"

"All that comes with it?" Jon replied incredulously. "The Queen may be blind to her family's crimes, but the North remembers. Lord Rickard Stark, burned, alive. His son and heir, Brandon Stark, choked to death in an attempt to free his father. My mother, Lyanna Stark, left to die in a pool of her own blood thanks to the heritage of Rhaegar Targaryen and all that comes with it."

Jon's voice filled the hall, his bitter feelings towards the dead Prince overriding his better judgement. He knew the conversation must end as soon as possible. It was not wise to argue with the Lord Commander of the Queensguard. Not when the Night's Watch desperately needed Daenerys' assistance.

*I should not have said that.* Jon berated himself, but of all people, he had thought the noble and righteous Ser Barristan the Bold would understand. Barristan, who served Robert Baratheon for nigh on twenty years.

"Is that what you think?" Ser Barristan questioned. The white knight leaned forward with interest. Jon could see the various strands of his white beard twitch as he talked. "No wonder. I served your father, and your grandfather for many years. It is true that Aerys was mad, but Rhaegar was neither mad nor cruel. Anyone who knew him would tell you so."

The knight spoke with quiet confidence, assured of his own truth. Jon narrowed his eyes.

"You deny his role in my mother's death?"

Ser Barristan faltered. His brow furrowed furiously in thought. The knight opened his mouth and closed his mouth, but as far as Jon was concerned, there was nothing he could say. It was obvious to him that the older man's blood ran red and black with dragons.

Ser Barristan finally sighed and looked far away, lost in a memory. "I served your father, for a time," the knight said sadly. "I was never privy to his private life, as Ser Arthur was his foremost confidant. But I never doubted his love for your mother. At his death, he spoke her name and her name only. Lyanna."

Jon recoiled visibly. A year of resentment towards the shadowy figure of Prince Rhaegar surged forward. Painful, hot and angry resentment. Jon had crafted him into a monster. The demon who had loved his mother, whilst Jon himself was robbed of that love and more. He was robbed of her flesh, robbed of her voice, and robbed of her comfort. All these things belonged to Jon and in his mind, Rhaegar was the man to blame.

A shaking hand left the door and he took a step back.

"You lie," Jon hissed.

*The story might be true,* a small voice said and Jon struggled to silence it. To even mention the name *Targaryen* north of the Neck was akin to treason. Lord Stark could not bear the tales of romance and rape borne of Robert's Rebellion. Jon had heard little of the odious Rhaegar save for his hideous crimes. *And even those stories Lord Stark would not tolerate in his halls.*

"Rhaegar rode North for you," Ser Barristan nodded now, more certain than before, a gleam in his eye. "Did you not wonder why Ser Oswell, Ser Gerald, and Ser Arthur remained with your mother? I did. Why did he ride so willingly to his death? Was it a diversion, a distraction? A means to fix the
eyes of the world on the Trident whilst you were born in Dorne or ferried across the sea," the old man was speaking to himself now, more than Jon. Ser Barristan stroked his white beard in thought. "At least, his intentions might have been if not for Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark."

Jon could not look at Barristan's smiling face. For months, Rhaegar's violet eyes had taunted him in his dreams.

"My mother belonged in the North," Jon refuted weakly. "They say she was abducted."

"The Knight of the Laughing Tree? Abducted?" Ser Barristan huffed. "Lyanna Stark's reputation was as a warrior. She was as fierce as she was beautiful. A fighter. Do you truly believe your mother would be subdued by Rhaegar?"

The Knight of the Laughing Tree? Daenerys had obviously shared the letters between Rhaegar and Lyanna with her Queensguard and advisor. Jon was silently offended. Lyanna Stark was his mother. His. One of the few things on this earth that was entirely Jon's and no one else's. And her memory was his to protect.

Lord Stark told me Lyanna was strong-willed, like iron. Jon suddenly recalled. A skilled rider, trained with the sword and bow.

A wave of exhaustion struck him. The space behind his eyes throbbed. Two conflicted ideas circled one another, unwilling to compromise. Rhaegar the monster and Rhaegar the man.

Jon never intended to waste this much thought on the Silver Prince. Scars still lingered on his heart, ready to tear and reopen with the mere mention of his birth father's name. Thoughts of what might have been resurfaced, and inevitably, Jon's mind turned to his mother's final resting place in the damp, dark tombs beneath Winterfell. A grey, lonely statue and the absent son who never visited.

"Enough," Jon said, holding up his hands in surrender. "The past is dead."

Ser Barristan pursed his lips and nodded.

"Aye, the past is dead. Forgive me."

With that, Queen Daenerys' sworn shield retreated down the hall, his tall white cloak swaying as he walked. Jon swung the door shut with a bang.

Later that evening, Ser Barristan returned. When Jon first opened the door the pair shared an uneasy silence, until the knight revealed that Jon had been summoned. Neither willing to break the silence, the two walked to the Queen's council chambers without exchanging any further words. At the entrance to the large antechamber, the knight bowed in farewell. Jon's eyes followed him as he left, unspoken questions on his lips. Another time, Jon thought.

"Sit," the Queen gestured when he entered.

A large, round, stone table dominated the centre of the room. Stone chairs sat askew around its periphery. A map of Meereen and Slaver's Bay had been drawn in colored paints across the surface. Two Unsullied soldiers stood at the door but otherwise, they were alone.

Daenerys Stormborn's eyes bored into his skull and Jon hastened to obey.
Jon sank into a seat across from the Queen. Jon was reminded of his many conversations with King Stannis, at the edge of the world. The lady stood tall and intimidating, the stack of letters he had brought halfway across the world lay strewn across the table. At least she has read them, he thought.

"Tell me about the Others."

He did not need to be told twice.

"The Others are ancient creatures of winter, Your Grace," Jon began slowly, careful to add a polite honorific. "Eight thousand years ago, the first Others rose in the North and ushered in the Long Night. With them, they brought an army of the dead. That winter that lasted generations. Babes were born and died in the dark and the dead hunted the living. During this age, the Night's Watch brotherhood emerged and together with the First Men and the Children, ushered in the dawn. Bran the Builder raised the Wall with the magic of the Children, to prevent the Others from ever trespassing on the lands of the living again. Or so the legend goes."

Daenerys listened patiently, tight-lipped and unblinking. "Children's fables and old wives' tales," the Queen frowned when he was finished.

_Grumpkins and snarks_, Lord Tyrion once said. Only Stannis had believed without seeing. And perhaps he had seen something in the red priestess' flames.

"Many say the same of dragons," Jon replied. "Your Grace," he added, after a moment's pause.

The Queen turned her cheek and paced slowly. Although shorter than he'd thought, she comported herself with all the manners of royalty. Daenerys held a straight back, her hands folded patiently at the waist as she mulled over his words. Jon could not have guessed her thoughts at that moment. Stannis was different, he was all iron and law and unyielding justice. Stannis spoke exactly what he meant to say. Whereas Daenerys, in Jon's limited experience, was either raging mad or coldly silent. A fact that did not sit well with Jon.

"The Wall was built to defend the Seven Kingdoms from wildlings," the Queen finally said and continued to walk the circumference of the room. Jon followed her with his eyes.

"The Wall's true purpose was lost," Jon replied. "Until the attack on Castle Black made it clear once more."

Jon thought of Lord Commander Mormont and his unfortunate death. _Mormont believed in the war for the dawn, and he died for that belief. One way or another._

"So I have read," Daenerys interrupted his thoughts. The Queen hovered over the scattered papers. She touched the corner of one letter pensively. "This Ser Alliser was born to House Thorne, a knight once loyal to my house," she pondered aloud. "But I would have liked a missive from the Lord Commander."

"Lord Commander Mormont—"

"Is dead. I know," the Queen cut him off calmly. "I read that too. I read a great many things. The Night's Watch supports your claim, as does Lord Varys."

Jon gambled with his next words. It was clear that Daenerys had weighed the evidence presented before her and stood on the cusp of a decision. _I must press the advantage, now or never._

"Westeros calls for your aid, Your Grace."
The Queen narrowed her eyes. "Meereen calls for my aid," Daenerys said sharply and gestured out the window. From the top of the tall pyramid one could see the city sprawled across the horizon. Below, small dots of people ambled through the streets. The other large pyramids of Meereen jutted into the sky, flanking its many gates. "I hear it, every day. I have released the slaves from their chains but my rule is challenged. Cowards in masks rise against me and the masters plot to return my freed cities to slavery. What faith will I keep in Westeros if I cannot rule in Meereen?"

Jon could see the Queen was bothered by her apparent ineffectiveness. Daenerys' decision to settle in Meereen was no longer a puzzle, but it was still a disappointment. Regardless, Jon reminded himself. I made a promise.

"Westeros is not Meereen, Your Grace," Jon insisted. "I do not ask you to abandon your people—"

"You do not have the right to ask me anything," the Queen retorted.

Jon stifled a loud sigh. Daenerys' violet eyes flashed with a hidden warning he chose to ignore.

"To rule is to be asked everything of yourself," Jon replied. Memories of Castle Black and all he had sacrificed returned to the forefront of his mind.

Daenerys frowned at his disrespect.

"You are a bold man," the Queen settled on saying and returned to her chair, facing the large window. Daenerys elegantly crossed her feet, a detached expression sliding over her features as if she had never spoken at all. It felt like a slap in the face. Jon was struck by the desire to stand and shout.

I am desperate! He wanted to shout and shake her shoulders. I am tired and I am wretched. Boldness has no place here.

"The Others will slash and hack and kill everything between the Wall and the sea if no one stops them," Jon replied, unable to keep the contempt from his tone. "And no one person can. Only together, with all the force of mankind, can the Others be stopped."

The Queen's unreadable expression faded, replaced by one of taut interest.

"All the force of mankind," Daenerys repeated slowly and looked into his eyes. "You mean to say, all the force of the Seven Kingdoms. Do you plan on uniting these Kingdoms, Jon Snow?"

The Iron Throne, Jon thought sourly. Stannis loved it too. In all the world, there is not a more miserable piece of metal.

"No," Jon said firmly. "My heart is with Winterfell and my family in the North. I fear for their safety."

Daenerys arched an elegant brow at his response. "Quite a family," she drawled. "To disavow their son and brother. To cast him asunder into the world on a fool's errand. I wonder, how many of them would stare down a dragon for your sake?"

Jon did not know what the Queen was implying. He thought of skinny little Arya, stubbornly standing before Balerion the Black Dread, needle at her side. He thought of Robb and their words on the banks of Riverrun, I was going to legitimate you. Give you a name, like you wanted. He thought of Sansa and her embrace. Rickon's wild tantrums and Bran's solemn determination.

"I believe I know several who would," Jon said confidently.
And yet, even as he spoke, a small voice whispered treachery. You were never Robb's equal, nor even Theon's. You were never trueborn.

The Queen frowned.

"Your Grace," Jon added hastily and bowed his head.

The pair lapsed into silence. The Queen contemplated and Jon worried over his fate.

"I have decided you will live," the Queen had the last word. "But I have not decided whether or not you are trustworthy. You will remain in Meereen, until I have made my decision."

The next morning Jon's clothing was stolen from him by one of Meereen's silent servants. When Jon emerged from the bath, new armor had been laid in its place. Black leather vambraces, a black coat of mail, black pants and black boots, all emblazoned with the blood red sigil of House Targaryen. Jon's stomach rolled at the sight, but he donned the outfit without complaint.

"We all have our part to play," Jon thought, swallowing his protest. Although I am not unaccustomed to black, it is the red that frightens me.

Ser Barristan appeared within an hour of dawn, silently nominating himself the ambassador between Daenerys and Jon. The white knight did not attempt to immediately engage him in conversation for which Jon was grateful.

"My thanks," Jon managed to say genuinely when the knight offered him the hilt of Blackfyre. It was a relief to be armed once more. Without a sword, Jon felt more naked than when his clothes had burned away.

The most interesting gift from the Queen's armory came in the form of a long black leather belt. The attached scabbard was engraved with silver prancing dragons. The work was of a fine quality. Jon did not dislike the silver and buckled Blackfyre willingly to his side once more. The blade's familiar weight was an instant comfort, and he could almost forgive the sword for its origins.

Jon followed Ser Barristan Selmy through the long halls of Meereen. The knight's long white cloak swayed back and forth, just barely grazing the tiled floor as they walked.

Ser Barristan repeatedly stole glimpses of his profile. Jon gritted his teeth every time, resisting the urge to snap at the man.

"Where are we going?" Jon finally asked, when the silence grew to be too much.

"To serve the Queen," the knight said mysteriously.

Internally, Jon rolled his eyes skyward as he had seen Edd do from time to time.

"And where is Ser Thoros of Myr?" Jon attempted again, hoping for a straight answer. I must speak with him as soon as possible, Jon thought but did not say out loud. Perhaps even engineer an escape, if negotiations with the Queen go south.

"Your knight has been released. The Queen attempted to sway his fealty, but he claims bound to you by oath," Ser Barristan said, looking Jon in the eye. "He is very loyal to you."

Jon was secretly pleased but revealed nothing. In the large, vaulted throne room, he found his sworn
knight waiting impatiently at the edge of one of the Queen's turquoise pools. The priest had donned a clean set of red robes once more, a strangely reassuring sight to Jon.

Jon and Thoros shared a brief but meaningful clasping of the forearms before the red knight spotted Ser Barristan. The two warriors eyed one another. Thoros, with barely concealed glee and Ser Barristan, with mild distaste.

"He doesn't like me," Thoros whispered in his ear conspiratorially, but loud enough to be heard. "I spit on his boots when the Queen asked for my fealty. Didn't act too pleased when I tried to kick him in the crotch, either. How was I supposed to know I was being released?"

_Loyal indeed, Ser Thoros._ All Jon could do was shake his head in exasperation and follow when Ser Barristan ushered them up, up, up the steps to where the Queen sat serenely on her cushioned bench.

Daenerys' violet eyes swept up and down his new armor with a vacant expression. With one graceful hand and a condescending look, she pointed and Jon was placed by her left side. Ser Barristan stood between the estranged relatives, a wall of white and steel. Thoros drifted towards Jon's other side with a wink and a smirk.

_The Queen has her sword, _Jon thought. _And I have mine._

"Stand still," the Queen said impassively, with nary a glance.

"As you command, Your Grace," Jon replied.

And Jon stood still.

_Several weeks later..._

Jon was tired of standing still.

The anger, indifference and aloof nature of Jon and Daenerys' first encounters would characterize their relationship for weeks.

During his time in Meereen's court, Jon learned three things about the dragon queen. First, she cared deeply for the plight of the former slaves. Second, she was preoccupied with maintaining a tight control of the Meereenese nobility because she cared deeply for the plight of the former slaves. And thirdly, Daenerys would march for Westeros tomorrow if not for the fact that she cared deeply for the plight of the former slaves.

On a usual day, Queen Daenerys saw a hundred petitioners in the morning, broke for a midday meal, and another hundred after that. One day, dancers came from Qarth. On another day, messengers from Pentos. She saw peasants and noblemen and goat herders and winemakers and masters and former slaves and on and on the list went until the doors closed with a silent _thud_ at the end of the day to Daenerys forlorn expression of defeat.

Jon almost felt sorry for her.

Although prone to righteous anger, the Queen was not mad nor suffering from illness of the mind. She could be kind and patient, even loving towards children and those loyal to her cause. The Queen held a great deal of affection for her translator, Missandei, and her knight, Ser Barristan. Sometimes, she even smiled faintly at Jon when he told her stories of the North, King's Landing and the Riverlands. A twitch of the lips. A softening of the eye.
But Jon distinctly did not feel sorry when her smile faded at the mention of the Others. It was his solemn duty to bring dragonfire to Westeros, and he would not relent. He would not silence when her lips pursed or her eyes narrowed. He would not shut up when she bid him shut up. He would not cease until the Queen cast him coldly from her sight, slamming the door to her quarters shut with a loud bang.

"The Night King grows stronger," Jon would say to her door, afterwards. "We are running out of time."

_And our greatest weapon is locked beneath this pyramid_, Jon would think to himself, every night as he was readying for bed and he unclasped Rhaegar Targaryen's cloak, unstrapped the red dragon on his chest and discarded the black armor that Daenerys loved. Jon would lean Blackfyre against the head of his bedframe and fall asleep, staring at the carved dragon heads on its handles. _We are running out of time._

When Jon finally pressed the subject of the dragon's imprisonment to Ser Barristan, the tale of Hazzea came to light. A young girl's bones had been laid at Daenerys' feet. The winged black shadow named the culprit and murderer. On that day, Daenerys imprisoned her dragons and forbade the story from ever being told. But rumor could not be stopped, and according to rumor she had laid the child to rest in the Temple of the Graces against the wished of the masters. Yet another rumor said the Queen wept for the child's soul in secret, behind closed doors.

The story reminded Jon of the conflict between Nymeria and Prince Joffrey, and the wrongful death of Lady, Sansa's direwolf. Jon told this tale to the Queen. Daenerys found Jon's story of direwolves and princes interesting but did not see the parallel.

"Why punish the siblings, when the one at fault goes free?" Jon had asked. "Nymeria was guilty, but Lady was punished. Drogon is guilty, but Viserys and Rhaegal are punished. Is that not a miscarriage of justice?"

Daenerys sent him away with a single, furious utterance.

"Get out."

Neither had spoken to the other since.

On the tenth day of their silent argument, Jon stood at the Queen's side with several new nicks in his black armor.

Once Jon gathered up the courage to ask, Ser Barristan gladly consented to a nightly spar. The knight was training several potential squires and believed the young boys could benefit from watching two masters. Jon admitted he simply could not resist the temptation to cross swords with the infamous Ser Barristan the Bold. The old man was pleased to hear it, and proved to be tougher competition than Jon ever expected. Jon met the dirt more than once during their fights, but then again, so did Ser Barristan.

Although his muscles were exhausted, it made it easier to stand for long hours on end, listening to the dramas of the court.

A shavepate appeared and bowed before the Queen, announcing the arrival of _Daario Naharis_.

Jon clenched his teeth in aggravation. He did not like Daario Naharis. Jon did not like sellswords in general but this was Daenerys' court and Daenerys' subjects in Daenerys' city. His opinion was not wanted.
The leader of the Stormcrows—A *sellsword company*, Jon thought with disapproval—inhaled the Queen and the court of the growing blockade of New Ghis, Tolos and Qartheen vessels anchored in the outer harbor.

*Proof of the growing tensions between Daenerys and her neighbors.* Jon ran a distracted hand over the still-growing stubble of his hair. *A war here will prolong Daenerys' rule indefinitely.*

The messenger and captain, Daario Naharis, had blue hair and a three-pronged beard which denoted him of Tyroshi origin. Jon wondered how he came to be in the Queen's service. When the captain's name was announced, a faint blush crept over Daenerys' cheeks and she nervously wrung her hands. It was subtle, but Jon had developed a keen eye for the Queen's moods (owing that he needed to avoid her ill temperament whenever possible).

Daenerys' spoke amiably to the captain and smiled often. Undeniably, the man's presence sent the Queen aflutter. *To Ser Barristan's displeasure*, Jon noted silently and held back a smirk. The two shared a concerned glance once the man was gone as the Queen was straightening her skirts.

Jon planned to tease her mercilessly whenever the opportunity arose.

"Next," Daenerys said simply, once she was done.

Jon rolled his neck in the interim.

"Grey Worm," the shavepate announced.

Jon perked up. Grey Worm, he liked. Grey Worm was honest and straightforward, sincere in thought and action. Grey Worm was, in fact, the only Unsullied whose company Jon enjoyed. The man was also an excellent swordsman and wielded a spear better than any wildling Jon had met. Not that anyone asked Jon.

The leader of the Unsullied appeared, tall and muscled and serious, and informed Daenerys of the Yunkish approach. An army coalition spearheaded by Yunkai's former masters had swelled in numbers over the last several months as money flowed from the pockets of rich men, into the hands of sellswords and desperate slaves. Astapor was now lost. Another free city reverted back to slavery.

More dead bodies laid at the Queen's feet. Grey Worm's somber report brought forth Daenerys' former melancholy mood.

In response, the Queen closed the gates of Meereen.

*What gods are on my side that allowed me to pass into the city while I still could?* Jon thought and rubbed a sore muscle on his neck absentmindedly. *Father's gods? Thoros' god? Tormund's gods? If there is only one god, why are they all so different?*

"Next."

The Queen heard stories of a disease called *the pale mare*. Fear of this new sickness permeated the city, and Ser Barristan added that the bloody flux had been known to destroy armies and cities alike. A fact that did not sit well with the Queen.

"Even more reason to close the gates," Daenerys said sadly and dismissed the healer who came to lament his woes.

Jon agreed but was unsettled. A gnawing feeling in the back of his mind refused to relent. Day after day, the feeling grew. In his gut, he knew, the worst was yet to come.
Daenerys' rule hangs by a thread, he thought. War, insurrection, famine and disease surround Meereen. She is surrounded by enemies. If men cannot get in, can they get out? Jon wondered if even he would escape Meereen alive.

"Next."

Finally, a nobleman in a blue and yellow tokar approached with a bowed head and folded hands. Hizdahr zo Loraq. With red-black hair and a meek nature, Jon recognized him as a well-spoken aristocrat. Although Jon did not agree with Hizdahr's politics and ideals, he respected him. Any man who would withstand the Queen's wrath for the sake of his people, day after day, was worth noticing.

Hizdahr bowed low before the Queen and spoke smoothly of the distrust amongst the nobles in the outer ring, who feared Daenerys would abandon them to the worst of the fighting, now that the Yunkish army approached. The Queen dismissed those fears, instead questioning the nobleman about the Sons of the Harpy, a rebel group who had taken up arms against Daenerys' regime.

"Do you have any names for me?"

"Do you know where they're hiding?"

"Who funds the Sons of the Harpy?"

"Where are the knives bought?"

The nobleman grew increasingly agitated, deflecting the Queen's questions with a pleading and insistent tone. Never once, did he waver with his story. The man knew nothing and Jon was beginning to believe him, if only because he could not imagine a guilty man withstanding Daenerys' interrogation for so long without buckling.

Hizdahr glanced at him. Their gaze met more than once in the last several weeks, the unspoken question on the tip of his tongue. Who are you?

"... now that the fighting pits have been reopened," Hizdahr continued, after successfully managing to change the topic. "The faithful and reliable Master Yezzen zo Qaggaz offers Rekkan's pit to the Queen for the preliminary fights. Traditionally the King or Queen of Meereen—"

"I have agreed to attend the opening games in Daznak's pit," the Queen interjected. "Nothing else."

Jon had seen the great fighting pits of Meereen. In the fighting district, it was difficult to see much else. The pits large arenas dominated the city's lower quarters. Jon estimated each arena could hold thousands of spectators. Daznak's was the grandest of them all, with golden statues and multi-colored benches.

Where slaves fight for the entertainment of the masters. Jon's stomach churned at the thought. Slavery was rightfully outlawed in the North. He recalled a story, long ago, of how Jorah Mormont dared to sell poachers to a slaver for profit. Lord Stark had banished him for the crime.

"Your Grace," the sellsword, Daario Naharis interceded, breaking Jon's train of thought. The blue-haired captain had returned to stand guard at the base of the steps. Ser Barristan's knuckles turned white.

"The son of Loraq speaks true," the captain said with a mischievous grin. "The ruling monarch traditionally tours the preliminary trials. Your presence would boost morale and demonstrate your respect for Meereen's noble fighting culture."
Glancing sideways, Jon saw Ser Barristan's nostrils flare. *Daario has no friend in this one*, Jon deduced.

"Very well," the Queen conceded the point. "If that is all?"

Hizdahr zo Loraq looked as if he had a great deal more to say—and none of it pleasant—but the Meereenese man simply shut his mouth with a click, bowed peacefully and walked away. Jon watched him go. At the door, the former master glanced back, eyes meeting Jon's. The nobleman nodded once and the doors closed with a dull thud.

"Jon," Daenerys' voice shook his concentration.

Jon looked down at her, hand resting on the pommel of Blackfyre

"You will join me."

Chapter End Notes

Combined several story lines into one this chapter and in the next several chapters.
Rhaegal

Chapter Summary

Jon spends time in the dragon pit. Daenerys speaks to Jon.

Chapter Notes

Aw, season's almost over.

Jon sat in the dim of the dragon pit beneath Meereen's great pyramid. Cross-legged, he could only see three to four feet in either direction, the light from his torch insignificant compared to the great dark of Rhaegal and Viserion's home.

Of the two dragons, Jon currently knew Rhaegal's location. Upon his arrival, Viserion would often climb the walls and hang like a bat from the ceiling. The white dragon was ever so slightly smaller than his brother, and had an inquisitive nature. Jon would have liked to see him but Rhaegal would snap and roar and raise the sharp edges of his spiked mane if Viserion dare approach.

Jon was confused by Rhaegal. Confused and intrigued.

The green and bronze dragon cried loudly whenever the large stone door slid open, and silenced only when Jon sat at the base of a large column nearest the beast's chains. After it ceased crying, the creature did what it always did. Rhaegal the dragon pressed its immense muzzle against Jon's ribs and heart, inhaled once, and then trapped him betwixt two massive wings.

Now, the dragon's large head lay in front of him. If Jon were to extend a hand, his palm would come into contact with Rhaegal's smooth scales. An unfortunate name, Jon could not help but think for the umpteenth time.

The air was filled with a sinister silence, punctuated only by Rhaegal's great breaths.

Dragons have been known to listen to the conversations of men. Maester Marwyn had written, a long time ago. A young Lord Tyrion had scribbled in the margins of the page, Must try.

"I would have named you for the forest," Jon told the dragon. "For the bronze hills or the earth. Vermithor was called the Bronze Fury, did your mother tell you that? He had bronze scales and was nearly as large as Balerion the Black Dread. Hmm," Jon tapped his knee in thought. "What of Foresthor? Or Bronzewood?"

The dragon did not respond but the clawed hand closest to Jon twitched.

Next came the tricky part.

If the dragon was sleeping soundly, Jon could slip away. If the dragon feigned a false slumber—as Jon discovered dragons could do—then the animal would startle awake, pull its great hands together, and crush him against its horned head, effectively blocking Jon's path forward with its large,
canvassed wings. The last time, Jon had nearly been impaled. A barbaric embrace of the most violent nature.

That was the danger of these visits. The dragon wanted Jon to be as imprisoned as it was. Rhaegal resented his freedom. The first time Jon attempted to leave the animal had grown so enraged it nipped at his shoulder—tearing into flesh—and bathed him with a fiery breath. The beast roared to the heavens, a roar so horrific it shook the earth beneath Jon's feet.

The wound was superficial and the fire did not burn, but Jon could not bring himself to face the pit for several days. When he finally returned, he brought Ser Barristan to stand at the door. The white knight agree to send for Daenerys if Jon called, but wisely chose not to descend into the gloom. Instead, the Queensguard stood just outside the door. Thoros would have been Jon's preferred choice but Daenerys was not fond of the red priest and would not tolerate him as a messenger. The Queen felt he was impudent.

Fortunately for Jon, he had discovered the beast's great weakness. Or rather, Maester Marwyn and Tyrion Lannister had discovered its weakness.

Jon thumbed the salt stained leather strip stuck between the leaves of A Complete Summary of Dragon Behaviors and Legends. Opening to the last bookmarked page, Jon began to read.

"Although it is true that the dragons of Old Valyria once roamed the wide world, none but a dragon rider could describe the bond shared between the Valyrians and their dragons. This book shall make a poor attempt. I defer to the dragonlord Aurion who once described the bond as such: 'A dragon is an expression of the soul,' he said, before his failed reconquest of Valyria. 'I command the dragon in so far as I command myself. Who here is the master of their heart?''"

"Can I loan you then?" Jon paused to ask the dragon. "The freefolk believe the animals of the wilderness contain the spirits of the gods. I suppose you are not property."

The dragon opened its eye a mite. Rhaegal's golden iris fixed upon him. A deep rumble filled the air and a shiver traveled down Jon's spine. But then the sound stopped and the dragon drifted off once more.

"Aurion, as we know, failed to bring the Doom to heel and was lost to the black smoke that covers the ruins of Valyria to this day. We also know from the life of Balerion the Black Dread that a dragon is not limited to a single rider. Although dragons are borne of blood, magic and fire, we cannot conclude without more evidence that these creatures are bonded by more than basic affection. And the evidence is lacking. For dragons are fickle in nature, even to their Valyrian kin."

The younger brother was listening, of that Jon was certain. He could hear the clink, clank of Viserion's chains as the dragon stretched its wings.

"Overall, we know that dragons have affection for their friends, and fury for their enemies. To say anything more would be conjecture."

Jon sighed.

"I hope you consider me a friend, Great Dragon of Meereen."

Rhaegal said nothing. Though, I suppose he cannot speak, Jon thought. Ghost could not speak.

The spirit of the wolf weighed heavily on his heart. And no matter how he wished it, Rhaegal was not Ghost.
Jon glanced at the sleeping head of the green dragon and silently closed the book, careful to mark the page. Standing, he crept towards the large steps that would lead to the open air.

Night was falling on Meereen.

Jon had heard Maester Luwin talk of how time changed across the world. How some cities were ahead, and others behind, due to the cyclical nature of the sun and moon. He wondered what time of day or night it was in Westeros. Was it dusk? Or dawn? Or midday? Did it snow in Winterfell?

Regardless of the time half a world away, the city of Meereen was awash in the dark beauty of dusk. Her sky painted in shades of violets and blues. The lanterns and braziers lit along Meereen's causeways, streets and pyramids outlined the majesty of her architecture and the vastness of the ancient city.

Ser Barristan stood proudly at the entrance of the pit. Jon greeted him with a curt nod. The white knight met his eye and tilted his head towards the steps.

There, in solemn black, Daenerys stood waiting.

Jon swallowed dryly. How many days had it been since they last spoke? Twelve? Fifteen? The damnable silence between them had grown to the size of a hairy mammoth, lumbering over their heads and hammering on their skulls whenever they were in each other's company.

"Your Grace," he said and bowed his head.

The Queen beckoned Jon to follow and the pair walked in silence, until they reached the section of Meereen's gardens that overlooked the Temple of the Graces.

The gardens of Queen Daenerys' pyramid were Jon's favorite place to think. One could walk for hours without repeat. Olive branches flanked sandstone walkways and the arched stone bridges were strung with lanterns made of blue, green and yellow paper. In this fashion, the gardens were interconnected, the balconies spiraling upwards against the pyramid walls.

Before bed, Jon often found himself pacing the garden's many paths and reviewing the star map the sailors of Braavos once taught to him. Sometimes, he hummed the many songs and sagas he learned during his worldly travels. But only in Thoros' presence.

Unfortunately, the gardens were also one of Daenerys' favorite retreats. Although the terraces were large, the two would inevitably cross paths and exchange a terse greeting.

"Your Grace."

"Jon."

And that was that.

Today, however, it seemed the silver lady had other plans. Daenerys approached the edge of the terrace and extended her arms to rest on the carved balustrade. From this vantage point, Jon could see the westernmost gate of the city, still closed, and the black sea beyond. In the distance, the dark shadows of slaver's ships bobbed in the bay.

Sensing the words would never come, Jon sat without permission. On a stone bench he stretched his long legs forward and rubbed his aching right thigh. Sitting patiently still for long hours, reading to a persnickety dragon, took a toll on his joints. Often, his right leg would go numb and he would limp
out of the pits, to Ser Barristan's amusement. The same leg used to give him trouble when he sat at the Lord Commander's desk.

The Queen plucked a leaf from a nearby branch and twirled it in her hands. Jon was content to wait. It was Daenerys who called him here, therefore Daenerys must speak first.

"Now that you've spent more time with them. What do you think?"

There was no need to ask who them was. It was obvious to whom the Queen referred. Jon's mind went to Rhaegal's rapacious nature and Viserion's mercurial attitude.

"They are… well fed."

The Queen exhaled sharply. A short laugh? Jon wondered. He was not certain what her laughter would sound like, if he should ever hear it. Light and bubbly? Cruel and vindictive?

"I know it's cruel to keep them in a pit, I don't need you to remind me," Daenerys said softly, a subtle note of vulnerability in her expressive eyes. "After all, what mother locks her children in the dark?"

Jon wisely choose not to respond. The question did not need an answer. He had heard the Queen refer to the dragons as her 'children' before.

"So now you've seen them. You've gotten to know them. They like you," Daenerys clasped her hands and turned to face him directly. "Of course they do. You talk to them. See them as more than beasts. And who am I to them? The detestable woman who brings them misery with cage and chain and whip!"

The Queen violet eyes glowered. It was possible she was angry at him. Angry that he spent time with her children. Angry that they slept at his feet while the dragons snapped and roared and rejected their mother's presence. Or perhaps she is angry at herself?

"What am I to do?" she suddenly implored him, shaking her head mournfully. "A girl is dead. An innocent young girl whose life was extinguished without cause. She didn't fight in any wars, she didn't own any slaves. So I can't let them free, and I can't keep them chained!"

The Queen's speech ended in a small shout. She straightened, realizing her voice had risen and echoed across the courtyard. Jon searched his mind for something, anything to say.

"In King's Landing, the dragon pit atop Rhaenys' hill is a terrible sight to behold," Jon began.

Daenerys inclined her head, as if to say, Go on.

"Terrible but awe inspiring. And beneath the city, the old Targaryen dragons dug a labyrinth of tunnels. Some as large as castles, the smallest the width of a wagon," Jon said softly. "Once, I imagine, Balerion, Vhagar and Meraxes roamed these halls freely. But then, the Targaryens chained their necks and feet. They barred and buried their tunnels and over time, the dragons became less and less. The last was small and feeble. It died as an infant."

The Queen listened, still as a statue once more. The story of the Targaryen dragons was well known in Westeros, but perhaps Daenerys was not familiar with this tale. Daenerys, who grew up on foreign shores.

The sun had set fully now and the crickets began to chirp.

"I don't know," he finished sympathetically, after a long pause. "I don't know what it's like to have
children or be a parent. I was a bastard. I vowed never to have children. I would not curse them with my name and so, I cannot imagine the heavy heart you must carry."

"You're not a—" Daenerys began and then stopped herself.

Jon waited. The Queen wrung her hands, searching for the right words.

"I must apologize," she finally said, dropping all pretense. "For treating you cruelly. I did not mean to insult you at our first meeting, and I regret my decision to test your blood by fire. I should have believed you."

Jon's head rose to look at her. Daenerys had turned to play with a low, hanging branch. With nimble fingers she plucked and pruned and picked at ripe olives, pulling at the falling leaves. The tree would be mangled soon.

"Why?" Jon asked. "It's an unbelievable tale."

Daenerys' lips twitched, a somewhat smile.

"You must understand. My brother, Viserys," here, the Queen faltered. Her brother's name a mere whisper. "Viserys—well, he... he was—he was not well. He was mad. Mad like our father. It grew worse, over time," her eyes grew distant and sad. "Much worse. Until he didn't know who I was or how to treat a sister. There was no kindness, no love in his heart. I was no longer his family."

Jon leaned forward, the Queen's voice so quiet it could not be heard above the crickets.

"He beat me. More than once," Daenerys' thumbed a rotten olive and ripped it from the branch. Her words turned bitter and angry. "Said he'd let a dothraki horde and all their horses fuck me if it meant ascending to the Iron Throne. I hated him for that. He broke my heart before I even knew what it was. And I let him."

The Queen halted in her attack, as if suddenly realizing she'd been mutilating a plant for the last several seconds.

"So," Daenerys said, fully awakened from her trance. "That was the blood of the dragon, when it goes sour and spoils. Forgive me, I hastened to judge you. I have been fooled before."

Jon could tell it was painful for the Queen to apologize. As soon as the deed was done, the young woman looked away and to the sky, the light from the torches setting her eyes ablaze. Jon's eyes turned to the sky also, to look at the insignificant stars set against the the waning moon.

The conflict between them had grown familiar. Comforting even. It is easy to be angry, Jon thought. Even easier to give in to pride. It is difficult to understand. The options set before him, Jon realized he was eager to make peace, if only to gain an ounce of the Daenerys' trust. Otherwise, it would be a long and lonely road back to Westeros.

Jon bit back a sigh. The mistakes of his past haunted him. Too often, he thought of what might have been. If I had been wiser, if I had more patience, if I had drawn my friends closer to my confidence.

"You ask for forgiveness, and it is granted." Jon replied after a pensive silence. "We cannot hold onto grudges. Not now. Not with the wars to come."

The Queen's relief was visible.

"But I too, must apologize," Jon said. "I have been quick to test your patience and question your
motive. The reputation of your father is well known, and I must warn you, the Mad King's legacy will follow you to Westeros." The Queen stiffened and pursed her lips. Jon hurriedly continued. "Regardless, I should have spoken with more caution. I have seen too much of war and foreign lands, and too few friends. I am eager to return home."

The Queen moved to sit at his side. Jon did not think they had ever been so close. Her silver-gold braid brushed his arm and he could smell perfume in the air.

"I want to go home, too."

Daenerys' voice was laced with an unnamed emotion. Jon might have called it wistful, if not for the sad and defeated expression on her face.

"I believe you, you know," Daenerys said, after a pause. "I've thought about it, a lot. Why you're here. But I can't leave Meereen. Not yet. You've seen the barricade, the armies gathered on our doorstep."


"I agree that you must remain in Meereen," Jon said, every word sent a silent pain through his heart. You failed, you failed, you failed, echoed in his mind. "I do not want it, but you are needed here, I see that now. The city and these people need you, for they have no other saviour."

The Queen smiled faintly in the torchlight, but Jon did not think she was happy.

"Perhaps... one day."

And suddenly Jon saw a part of himself reflected in those violet eyes. The unrelenting longing to return home, the pain and suffering of ruling and the harsh deliverance of fate that crippled Daenerys. All of it was within him. And it was terrible, because he wanted to hate. No, worse than that. Jon wanted nothing from this woman and yet, he felt something he did not wish to feel.

Kinship.

But Jon was not willing to bend. Not yet. He hardened his heart.

"You know the answer," Jon said harshly. "Allow me to defend Westeros. Allow me to defend my people—our people, in your stead."

Jon had not intended to say that last part. It slipped out. A small whispered compromise between them. It lingered there, unaddressed, but Jon saw it nonetheless and it displeased him.

The Night's Watch takes no part in the wars of the realm, Jon recalled. Commander Mormont had reminded him often, when news of Robb and his armies reached the Wall, when Jon wanted to ride south with shield and sword. Although he was no longer bound by oath, a crow sat perched on his heart, crooning words of duty and obligation. And the crow would not die. No matter the circumstance, no matter the monarch.

The Queen looked down at her hands. They were clean hands, Jon noted. Most likely soft. He doubted Daenerys had experienced hard labor in her lifetime. Only a different kind of labor, the unbidden thought came to Jon. How many men at the Wall called you a soft, green bastard? And complained when you did not train in the yard? Not knowing how many hours you stood pacing, and planning, and torturing yourself with their fates.

"Give me time," Daenerys said in a small voice.
"We don't have any more time."

Daenerys laughed harshly. The sound startled Jon with its severity.

"No one has time to give, but I must give the world all of my time. How is that fair, Jon Snow?"

Jon scowled, knowing she was right, but also knowing that harsh lessons sow more seeds than kind ones.

"Time is hateful," he said darkly in return, standing to face the glowing moon. "It runs leagues whilst we stumble to walk. And only once we have gained the experience, the knowledge and the strength to run with it, time strikes us down."

Unbidden, his right hand rose to lightly trace the wounds on his heart and stomach.

"You have a very dark perspective," Daenerys said slowly. "I suspect you have seen very dark things."

The image of Ygritte, lying prone in the snow, blood pooling around her cold body, rose to the forefront of his mind. Jon shook it away forcibly.

"I have seen the darkness," he admitted painfully. "The North is bathed in it. Today is gone. Tomorrow will be gone. But if you act now, you will save thousands of lives. You have a heart, Your Grace. Use it. Be the light they seek, and perhaps they will love you not for your name, but for who you are."

"As they loved you?" Daenerys replied, her violet eyes piercing.

A wave of shame overwhelmed him, Jon looked away. It was a lie, and she knew it.

"I will think on it," the Queen said with finality.

Jon bowed and sped away. Down the path and up the stairs, racing towards the privacy of his rooms. The conversation replayed in his mind.

"He broke my heart before I even knew what it was." The door slammed behind him, echoing loudly in the night. "As they loved you?"

"Poor Jon," Jon overheard Sansa say, three years ago. "He gets jealous because he's a bastard." With shaking hands, Jon ripped off his scabbard and threw his sword in the corner. It clattered to the ground. "It should have been you!" Lady Stark stood over him. Aegon the Conqueror's ruby sword glinted in the moonlight. Jon ripped the green curtains from the windows and threw it over the damned blade. "Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord," Jon counted, not including himself.

Jon ran a frustrated hand through his short, cropped hair and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Did you mean to leave this behind?" Lord Stark said, holding out the red cloak.
Daenerys slowly warmed to Jon’s presence in the great pyramid. The two exchanged more than a one or two words in the mornings and evenings. From time to time, the Queen even condescended to ask Jon’s opinion on matters of the court, and Jon kept his answers as succinct as possible.

Although not familial, the cordiality was an improvement.

Jon ultimately decided not to press the subject of the Others or the dragons with the Queen until the opportune moment presented itself. Now, he knew the key.

Daenerys loves her dragons. She would never part with one of her ‘children’ to a mere advisor. Jon needed to prove himself and fast.

But how to make Daenerys see the “westerosi upstart” as trustworthy? Jon would ponder at night, facing the western sea. When I am the competitor to her throne? The bastard Targaryen interloper.

The potential usurper.

"Will you take the palanquin with me?" Daenerys asked with a smug smile, interrupting Jon’s daydream.

The Queen had bedecked herself in Ghiscari green and yellow. Sapphires—a gift from one of the ruling houses of Meereen—were woven into her silver-gold hair. The sun shone high in the sky, striking the jewels and lending the Queen a blue halo. Jon thought she resembled the very image of a valyrian goddess.

In the enclosed court, just adjacent to the entrance of the great pyramid, a small party had gathered to escort the Queen to Rekkan’s pit. Red colored birds sang on Meereen’s slanted sandstone roofs,
heralding their departure.

Jon glanced at the Queen’s covered litter and could not hide his aghast expression.

"I’d rather lose an arm," he said and took the reins of a proffered tan mare from Ser Barristan.

The Queen laughed. A bright, happy sound.

Ser Barristan’s white beard twitched with bemusement as he assisted the Queen onto her floating chair. The knight was obviously pleased that his two charges were no longer estranged.

Above the courtyard, a horn sounded.

Fifty Unsullied surrounded the Queen in the formation Commander Grey Worm dubbed “the arrow”. Jon rode immediately to the front of Daenerys, Thoros and Ser Barristan flanked her sides and Grey Worm defended the rear.

The Queen and her escort would travel a lesser known path out of the city, along an ocean cliffside to the south.

Down the hill, they went. The steady beat of horse’s hooves and the march of the Unsullied drove away the masters in their fine silken robes and drew out the formerly enslaved people of Meereen. Some in tattered rags, some with bare feet. The children came to lay flowers along Daenerys’ path and weary-eyed, wrinkled men and women bent to kneel in the dirt. The people cried their chosen moniker for the Queen, “Mhysa! Mhysa!”.

*The Queen has a mother’s heart*, Jon thought, with sudden clarity. *And she must follow where it leads her.*

Daenerys lowered the curtain shades surrounding her palanquin and smiled graciously down at her subjects.

Jon tensed. His hand drifted to the hilt of Blackfyre and his eyes swept the street ahead for masked men. The Queen’s leather across his knuckles creaked with groaned, reminding him of its freshness. Its naivety.

*Trust can be betrayed*, he thought.

The Sons of the Harpy had been driven underground, but Jon knew the rats would resurface once more. Rebellions do not die quietly overnight. *And when the silence is overwhelming, the rats will strike*, Jon thought bitterly, and in his mind, the image of glinting steel daggers returned tauntingly.

Slavery was evil—of that, Jon had no doubt—but the Sons of the Harpy had more to offer than slavery. They had country and culture. They offered a return to the normality and relative peace of yesterday. *Meereen is at war with itself*, Jon reflected as he led the Queen’s caravan down a crowded roadway. *A war that Daenerys cannot win without fire and blood, and yet fire and blood only fuels its resurgence.*

The street narrowed. Ser Barristan urged his horse to Jon’s right, and soon they were riding side by side. Behind them, Thoros launched into the tale of the Myrish bard, Barshi, who accidentally discovered firewine. Jon had heard the story before, complete with eruptions of fire from the red priests’ hands to depict the volcanos of Myr.

The Queen ooh-ed and aah-ed at all the right moments. Jon listened distractedly, eyeing the cramped buildings on either side of the road, and the darkened alleys between. When the company passed
beneath the series of sandstone gates and onto the mountainside, he breathed a silent sigh of relief.

A tall cliff created the boundary to their left, and a steep rock face fell into Slaver’s Bay on the right. Hizdahr zo Loraq’s preliminary trials would take place on a nearby summit, which had been carved into an arena by the masters, many centuries ago. *Or more likely, by the master’s slaves*.

“Jehaerys,” Ser Barristan said suddenly.

Jon glanced at the Queensguard. Fully suited, the knight was a character out of Sansa’s stories. Daenerys had gifted Ser Barristan a set of silver-white armor with gold filigree, specially made. *The Queen likes to give gifts*, Jon thought, but he had to admit the old man was an impressive sight on his tall white gelding.

“What?” Jon did not understand.

“He wanted to name you Jaehaerys, after the great conciliator.”

Jon gripped the reins of his mare tightly. Sensing his rider’s changing mood, the horse shook its mane.

“I have been thinking. Searching my mind for some clue, a puzzle piece that I overlooked or discarded. And then it came to me. I overheard a conversation once, between your father and Ser Arthur,” Ser Barristan said, as the path began to ascend.

A wave of anger and confusion struck Jon as it always did when Rhaegar Targaryen’s ghost resurfaced, which was often now. Jon had not heard the name *Rhaegar* so many times in his life. And Jon did not want to hear. He did not ask for any stories.

Regardless, the older knight was stubbornly determined to repair the tarnished image of the former prince in Jon’s mind. *For your edification*, the knight had told Jon.

“...Weeks before Rhaegar battled on the Trident, the two shared a private conversation and I caught the tail end before the prince became aware of my presence. Arthur had asked, *What shall he be named?* And Rhaegar responded. *Jaehaerys for the great feats he shall accomplish in his lifetime*. *For his is the song of ice and fire*. It seemed a riddle or a secret communiqué. I never understood it and I never spoke of it, until now. The Prince’s secrets were the Prince’s secrets, and I kept many royal secrets in my time. So many, I lost count.”

“Must you?” Jon asked the knight with exasperation as the procession took a sharp, rocky turn towards the summit.

“I must,” the knight smiled grimly. “To correct the wrongs you have attributed to your noble father.”

Jon held his tongue. Unbidden, the questions he never dare ask Lord Stark flared to life. Questions that jumped to the forefront of his mind when he looked into Daenerys violet eyes. Jon would have preferred to ask Maester Aemon, in the quiet of Castle Black’s rookery where no one would ever know.

Alas, the maester was not here, and the rookery was an ocean away.

No, Jon internally shook his head. *I will not give voice to those thoughts, not yet*. He feared it would only nourish Ser Barristan’s incessant need to *edify* and Jon could barely tolerate it as it was. He would wait until Maester Aemon stood before him, aged and frail. Then, and only then, would he speak of his innermost turmoil?
Except perhaps one, Jon thought. A benign question. One of minor importance and no significance. But one that had occurred to him once or twice since the beginning of Barristan’s education.

“Tell me this, Ser,” Jon said. “Though I loathe to question you. Was his right arm ever a bother?”

Ser Barristan eyes widened, no doubt thrilled that his beloved Rhaegar’s son had taken the bait. Jon avoided his gaze. The path wound higher and higher.

“I do not recall,” the old knight admitted regretfully. “As I said, Ser Arthur was his closest confidant. I will say I often saw him stretching his shoulder and neck after long hours at a desk or… on a horse.”

Jon was in the midst of rolling a shoulder back and froze.

“Uncalled for, Ser.”

The knight bowed his head and turned away. Jon could not read his expression but he imagined the knight was smugly satisfied. The more Ser Barristan spoke, the more Rhaegar the man became real, and Jon did not like it.

Is it not childish to cling to ignorant perceptions? A voice asked, similar to Lord Varys’ simpering tone. Rooted in the wounds of other men, in another time? Are there not a thousand facets to a cut ruby?

You might have been a monster, another treacherous voice sounded. The lilting, exotic cadence of the red witch. The traitor Jon Snow, who unleashed the wildlings on the North, and his rightful murder by the brothers of the Night’s Watch.

Precious gems lay at the bottom of the ruby ford, just as the snow was stained by the blood of Jon’s corpse.

Are we so different, after all? Jon’s heart clenched painfully at the thought. The path widened once more as the company approached the mountaintop. Ser Barristan returned to the Queen’s right side and the Unsullied fanned out. “The Pyramid” Grey Worm called this formation.

Once within the confines of the enclosed grounds, the Queen’s litter was lowered and Jon jumped to assist Daenerys, needing to feel useful and to escape Ser Barristan’s attention.

“Jon,” she said, surprised, but took his hand anyway. Jon gripped it tightly and steadied her balance.

The Queen placed a slippered foot on red-gold sand and headed towards a raised platform surrounded by long palms. Stone benches encircled the pit and were filled with various members of Meereen nobility, come to watch the entertainment. The lords and ladies alike bowed their heads towards the Queen. In the yard, several men practiced with spear and sword. Poorly and without direction, Jon noted.

Hizdahr zo Loraq, in all his patient glory, waited on the raised edge. Daenerys spared him a hostile glance and swept past the kneeling nobleman to sit on her purple cushion. To his credit, the son of Loraq did not react to the Queen’s subtle disregard.

“Jon Snow,” the man nodded in greeting, spotting the Queen’s newest advisor.

“Hizdahr zo Loraq,” Jon replied, nodding similarly.

The two men faced one another. Men from different worlds and different stations. Finally, the
nobleman turned to fold his robes and sit alongside Daenerys. But not without another calculating glance. *He knows my name and nothing else,* Jon hoped.

The Queen sat, crestfallen, and observed the mock swordplay as Hizdahr launched into an unnecessary and drawn out historical commentary on the “Great Games”. Already, Jon could sense a rigidity in her stance that was not present before. The Queen’s hand rose to wipe a drop of sweat from her brow and immediately, a young girl rushed to fan her face.

Daenerys’ startled. She waved away the girl with a sad expression and Jon caught her eye. He grimaced sympathetically.

“Your Grace! You honor us with your presence!”

A dark-skinned man with faded blue tattoos on his arms, and a slender gold belt approached the platform. He bowed low, placing a reverent hand upon his heart.

Jon was momentarily distracted from the master’s introduction as two small boys carrying bowls of dates and fruits attempted to approach the Queen. He held up a hand and turned them around gently. “Later,” he muttered in the Ghiscari dialect of Valyrian. One of the boys looked up at him with wide eyes, and Jon could not resist ruffling the lad’s hair to soften the dismissal.

When Jon’s attention returned to the arena, the master clapped his hands and the competition began. A hodgepodge of fighting styles clashed in the pits. Swords, spears, long knives, shields and even bare fists. Jon’s eyes were drawn to the superior fighters, many of which were victorious through sheer strength alone, not skill.

He winced as the first man died. The Queen looked away. Jon had seen many battles and many dead bodies. He had witnessed the death of hundreds if not thousands. He had seen men fall to their death, disappearing beneath white clouds. He had listened to the heart-rending wails of the burning and heard the piteous cry of “Mercy!” before the executioner's axe. But he had never watched for entertainment.

And he was not entertained.

*This is butchery,* Jon thought with disgust. *Not sport. Even dogs allow their prey to run.*

Hizdahr smiled congenially at the Queen but Daenerys was obviously distressed. The fallen man’s body twitched on the ground, blood gurgling from a laceration on his neck.

Jon struggled to observe the fighting until a dark figure caught his eye. A swordsman. Jon watched his progression from across the arena. One well-timed swing and his opponent was dead. One dodge and one lunge, and he downed another.

Jon straightened and Thoros took notice. With his eyes, Jon gestured to the mystery man. The red knight nodded in understanding. Ser Barristan, too, saw the fighter drawing closer. Jon observed the older knight’s troubled expression with trepidation. Anything that unsettled Ser Barristan, did not bode well for Daenerys.

A well-placed punch. Another dodge and with a single swinging blow the stranger cut down a man triple his size.

Closer now, Jon recognized the style of a Westerosi knight. It was written across the man’s shoulders, conspicuously obvious in his footwork and the grip of his hands.

*An assassin?* Jon thought with alarm.
In his mind, he listed the names of all the known lord's, lord's sons and sworn knights of the Lannisters and Baratheons. Anyone who might dare cross the Narrow Sea and seek out Daenerys. But why fight in the pits? Why not poison the wine or cut the Queen’s throat in her sleep? Jon loosened the pommel of Blackfyre from his black and silver scabbard.

Daenerys was watching keenly, leaning forward with a similarly concerned expression. The Queen’s hands were clenched into fists, her knuckles white and clutching the silver material of her dress.

“Say the word,” Thoros mumbled in his right ear.

Jon shook his head once in the negative. Not yet, he mouthed.

At long last, two final contestants faced one another. One, a large man with a spiked hammer. The other, a knight of unknown origin. The battle was swift and decisive. The Westerosi leapt to the left, ripped off the man’s helmet and knocked him unconscious without hesitation.

The crowd cheered and the Queen rose. Hizdahr followed grace fully, applauding with the other spectators, but Daenerys did not applaud. She was still, a cross between concern and fury etched on her face.

“Congratulations! A fine display,” Hizdahr zo Loraq said calmly, using his voice of reason to cast a spell over the audience. “You, fighter, are invited to the opening ceremonies of the Great Games, at Daznak’s Pit. Remove your helmet and tell us your name, so the people of the Great City of Mereen can toast to your good health.”

The victor removed his helmet.

And then something happened that Jon did not understand. A look of understanding passed between the knight and the Queen. Understanding and recognition. Daenerys’ shook her head slowly.

No, she was saying without words. No.

No to what? Jon wondered.

The man did not look particularly remarkable. He had a square face that looked vaguely familiar, but Jon could not place it. The man appeared travel-worn, dirty and tired, like any other fighter looking to make a name for himself in the Great Games.

“Get him out of my sight.”

Daenerys’ voice brokered no argument. Ser Barristan moved swiftly. The Queensguard glided down the platform steps to seize the man’s arm. “Khaleesi, please,” the knight said pleadingly, with a look of tortured anguish. “A moment of your time.”

The man looked with wide, worshipping eyes at the Queen. Daenerys looked physically pained by the sound of his voice, so broken and fragile.

Ser Barristan and the Unsullied began to drag him away. The man looked beseechingly at the Queen and Daenerys hands trembled almost imperceptibly. She is fighting for resolve, Jon thought. Who is this man?

“I brought you a gift!”

Daenerys closed her eyes. A gift, she mouthed to herself in disbelief. It was clear from the look on her face that she had lost all patience.
Knowing the Queen’s wrath was vicious when provoked, Jon decided to act. With one long stride, he placed himself between Daenerys and the knight. Gingerly, his hand encircled her wrist. Daenerys’ violet eyes looked at him with surprise. “We must return,” Jon told her, and gently began to pull. Surprisingly, the Queen followed.

“It’s true!” A voice called out.

Jon stopped, unwilling to believe his ears and yet he could not deny the startling familiarity of that voice. A trick of the mind, Jon thought instantly but released the Queen nevertheless. It cannot be.

Daenerys narrowed her eyes at him, befuddled. Jon’s expression must have alarmed her because she glanced around him and towards the source of the voice.

Not a gift.

A dwarf.

A very familiar, golden dwarf.

Tyrion son of Tywin sat at Daenerys’ stone table wearing a look of abject absurdity as if Daenerys had just told him rainbows gave birth to elephants. The dwarf had already consumed twice the amount of alcohol that would stagger a fully grown man and was gripping a large pewter mug with dubious security.

“No,” Tyrion said slowly. “Noooooo,” he said once more, lengthening the word and turning it over in his mouth. “Mmm. Yes, no. Oh, gods. I cannot—”

The imp finally abandoned that line of thought, and simply stared at Jon’s face with captivation, stroking his shaggy beard. Jon could see the warring thoughts in his mind, battling one another for dominance. Daenerys waited patiently.

"Damnit!" The dwarf finally swore. "Why didn't I figure that out? I'm clever! The cleverest! Cleverer than that eunuch at any rate."

Tyrion took another large gulp of wine, spilling some onto his roughspun shirt and the Queen took his goblet away.

“No,” Daenerys frowned. “I need you sober.”

“You cannot be serious,” Tyrion sighed and reached for the wine. This time, Jon moved and stole the glass carafe of Dornish red from underneath the imp’s nose. Tyrion glared at him. “Oh, I see you two are going to be very annoying together.”

The Queen arched an elegant brow and Tyrion sat back in defeat.

“Yes, well. Forgive my shock and awe for just discovering a truth that will knock this war on its ass. And forgive my jealousy towards you for being cured of your bastard-dom, Jon.” Tyrion smiled with self-deprecation. “You are fortunate, indeed. Unfortunately, I cannot follow in your footsteps. There is no cure for dwarffry, dwarf-ferry, dwarfishness, ah.. Yes.”

Tyrion cleared his throat uncomfortably and looked imploringly at the wine glass just out of reach. Jon fought a smile.
“I am still a bastard,” Jon replied, his tone brokering no argument. “And I make no claim of Targaryen blood.”

“Yes,” Tyrion replied slowly, with a sardonic look. “That will work out nicely for you, I’m sure.”

Jon frowned in return.

“You mentioned the war,” the Queen interjected. “Tell me what you know.”

Tyrion clicked his tongue and met Jon’s eye. The dwarf’s face was full of pity. Jon was suddenly afraid. Afraid for Robb. Afraid for Arya. Afraid for all the Starks and the North. *Please*, he thought. *Don’t tell me they’re dead. Don’t tell me it was all for nothing*.

“You are not going to like what I have to say.”

Jon swung with feverish force, unleashing the frustration within. Ser Barristan’s blade parried and the pair broke apart, circling one another. The courtyard was empty save for the two men. The pyramid’s other residents had already retired, but Jon slept so rarely these days that he decided to exhaust himself until his body collapsed. It was the only way to guarantee sleep. To avoid tossing and turning, for hour upon hour, until he finally abandoned all hope of unconscious relief and walked the gardens until sunrise.

And tonight—this night—Jon knew he would not sleep. Lord Tyrion’s words hung over his head. An executioner’s axe, dripping with blood, edging closer and closer to the junction of his neck. A single wrong move. A day too late. And the axe would strike.

It was not all for nothing, but it was nothing good.

It began with Stannis, who now ruled in King’s Landing.

Thousands of lives were lost during the fire and slaughter of the Battle on the Blackwater. On the dawn of the second day, Stannis rose as King. Sometime during the night, Lord Tyrion escaped with Queen Cersei and the young little Tommen. According to rumour, Joffrey’s head decorated the wall of the Red Keep for seven days. An unholy warning to Tywin Lannister.

The war changed irrevocably. Two Kings dwelled in Westeros. Tommen and Stannis.

*Theon sacked Winterfell, as he did before*, Jon thought with sadness. He dodged a lunge from the knight and brought Blackfyre to the man’s neck. Ser Barristan nodded his approval. *Robb married the Frey girl and the two left with a battalion of Northmen and Frey soldiers to retake the Stark ancestral home.*

The spar began again with a feint, only this time Ser Barristan landed Jon on his back with a well-placed shoulder against his stomach. Jon grunted in pain and saw stars.

*The Tyrells, not to be forgotten, betrothed Tommen to their daughter, Lady Margaery. A Lannister-Tyrell army lay siege to King’s Landing, while Stannis sailed North to deal with the Wildling threat against the wall.*

*Stannis burned the weirwood trees and the North rose against him. “Infighting and mayhem”, Tyrion called it.*
The knight held out his hand and Jon was lifted to his feet.

“Again,” Jon said, shaking the shock from his chest with a great heaving breath.

_The Starks lost control of half the Northern houses when Stannis allowed the Free Folk past the wall. In Winterfell, Robb now faces an insurrection from the united houses of Bolton, Karstark, and Umber. Robb is surrounded by an army. Starving with his Frey bride._

Jon knew he could not control fate, but he thought he had made a difference. Lord Stark lived, but just barely, trapped inside Riverrun with the Blackfish, his wife, and the remaining Tully forces. Lord Frey lay siege to Riverrun with Edmure Tully as his captive. A majority of the northern army and the northern lords had been defeated by a surprise attack on the Trident. A difference, but only a small one.

The North was divided and division meant defeat. What was more merciful? To be beheaded or to starve slowly, far away from home? At least Robb might die at Winterfell.

Jon hammered relentlessly against Ser Barristan’s shield. _No one knows where Arya has disappeared to._

_What difference did I make?!_ Jon raged internally.

The shield broke, cleaved in half where Jon struck. The Valyrian steel sword glowed unnaturally and Ser Barristan fell to the side to avoid the incoming blade. Blackfyre struck the dirt and Jon wheeled backwards, horrified. His grip loosened and the sword fell to the ground, it’s light extinguished.

_Clink, clang!_

The sword lay innocuously on the ground.

The old knight staggered to his feet. Jon and he exchanged a mystified expression.

“I never liked that shield,” the knight said amicably.

Jon heaved a great breath and fell to his knees, unable to hold himself to standing. He cradled his head between his hands, desperate for air. His chest moved but he did not breathe. _I am suffocating._ Jon thought with panic. The boots of the Lord Commander of the Queensguard came into view and a hand fell on his shoulder. The gentle weight startled Jon from his momentary alarm and he inhaled once more.

“You fight as if possessed,” Ser Barristan said breathlessly and shook Jon’s shoulder lightly.

Jon grimaced. _Not possessed, haunted. Haunted by the past, the present, and the future._

“I see him in you. Most of all, in these moments,” Ser Barristan told him quietly. Despite the low tone of the knight’s whispered words, Jon felt as if he had shouted across the courtyard. The pronunciation irked him. He did not wish to be likened to Rhaegar Targaryen. It brought the Silver Prince closer. Made him flesh and bone, when Jon only wanted to think of him as ashes.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Jon replied angrily, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Immensely,” the old knight admitted with a shrug. “I admired your father greatly. So did all who knew him. To know that the last of his light in this world has not been extinguished… there are no words. I am only sorry that he is not here to guide you. I suspect he would understand your struggle more deeply than I.”
“Enough,” Jon rasped and stumbled to his feet.

The world spun ever so slightly and Ser Barristan steadied him before he fell. The corners of his vision blackened and Jon fell to his knees. The knight wrapped an arm around his back to support his weight. Jon felt weak and ashamed to need an old man’s help.

_It’s all fallen apart_, Jon could not help but think. _I have failed._

“No,” Ser Barristan replied firmly as if to answer his thoughts. “You need to know. Rhaegar was possessed by the same drive. The same demons haunted him. The demon of prophecy. It drove him to do great things, but he always carried a heavy burden.”

Jon groaned. “I don’t want to hear stories about my father.” It was the first time he referred to Rhaegar as ‘father’ and the slip of the tongue was unintentional. _I am either more tired than I believe or Ser Barristan is having a greater influence than I thought._

“I will tell you what I should have told him,” Ser Barristan knelt on the ground next to him. The hand on his shoulder suddenly heavy, an anchor in the storm. “You are not alone.”

Jon laughed. It couldn’t be helped. A mad, maniacal laugh. The hand left his shoulder and he opened his eyes to meet Ser Barristan’s concerned gaze.


His voice was scathing, filled with resentment and anger. Jon pinched the bridge of his nose, begging his vision to focus so he could stand and leave.

“Daenerys will not sail for Westeros,” Jon said. Admitting the words out loud, he now fully realized them to be true. “I have failed to bring dragonfire to the Wall. I have failed my family and I have failed the free folk. I tried—” he struggled for breath, “—and I failed! So I tried again, and I failed again. If I return empty-handed, this will all have been for nothing. They’ll all die anyway!”

Ser Barristan eyes were downcast, a look of concentration on his face.

“As I said before, Jon. You are not alone. I have been searching my mind for an answer, a compromise between yourself and Daenerys,” the knight sighed. “I believe that you are alive for a reason. The war is not over yet. It has not even begun. You must not give in to despair.”

Jon hands tightened into fists. Small granules of sand filled his hand and slipped between his fingers. The silence of the night was deafening as he thought of all that had happened in Meereen, and everything that would never happen.

“I must leave soon, sooner than I expected,” he realized. “My time here has ended. My mission a failure. I must return home.”

Ser Barristan nodded sadly.

“I know,” he said and helped Jon to his feet. “And I will help you.”

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